

QUICK & EASY DIRECTIONS

MIX SOUP + 1 OCEAN WATER

RADIATION : HEAT, UNCOVERED IN MICROWAVABLE OCEAN ON HIGH ABOUT 100 MILLION YEARS. CAREFULLY LEAVE IN OCEAN FOR 3 BILLION YEARS, ALLOWING OXYGEN TO ACCUMULATE.

SMOKER: HEAT, CIRCULATING OCCASIONALLY

REG. U.S. PAT. & TM. OFF.

PROMPTLY REFRIGERATE UNUSED PORTION ON A SEPARATE PLANET.
RECOMMEND USE BY DATE ON END OF CAN.
STORE UNOPENED CAN IN INTERSTELLAR SPACE.

Nutrition Facts

Serv. Size 1 mole
serves one planet

Calories 0.0

Fat Calories 0.0

Serving size based
on a 99% chance
of a successful
Origin of Life.

Amount/serving	%DV	Amount/serving	%DV
Protein	0%	Metal sulfides	100%
Fat	0%	Hydrogen	100%
Carbohydrate	0%	Ammonia	100%
Fiber	0%	Methane	100%
Vitamins	0%	Carbon monoxide	100%
L-amino acids	1%	Formaldehyde	100%
D-amino acids	1%	High MW PAHs	100%
Nucleic acid	0%	NP-40	100%

Rich in reducing power, low in toxic oxygen and reactive oxygen products. High in heavy and transition metals. Great for the hottest, most radioactive watery planets!

Campbell's®

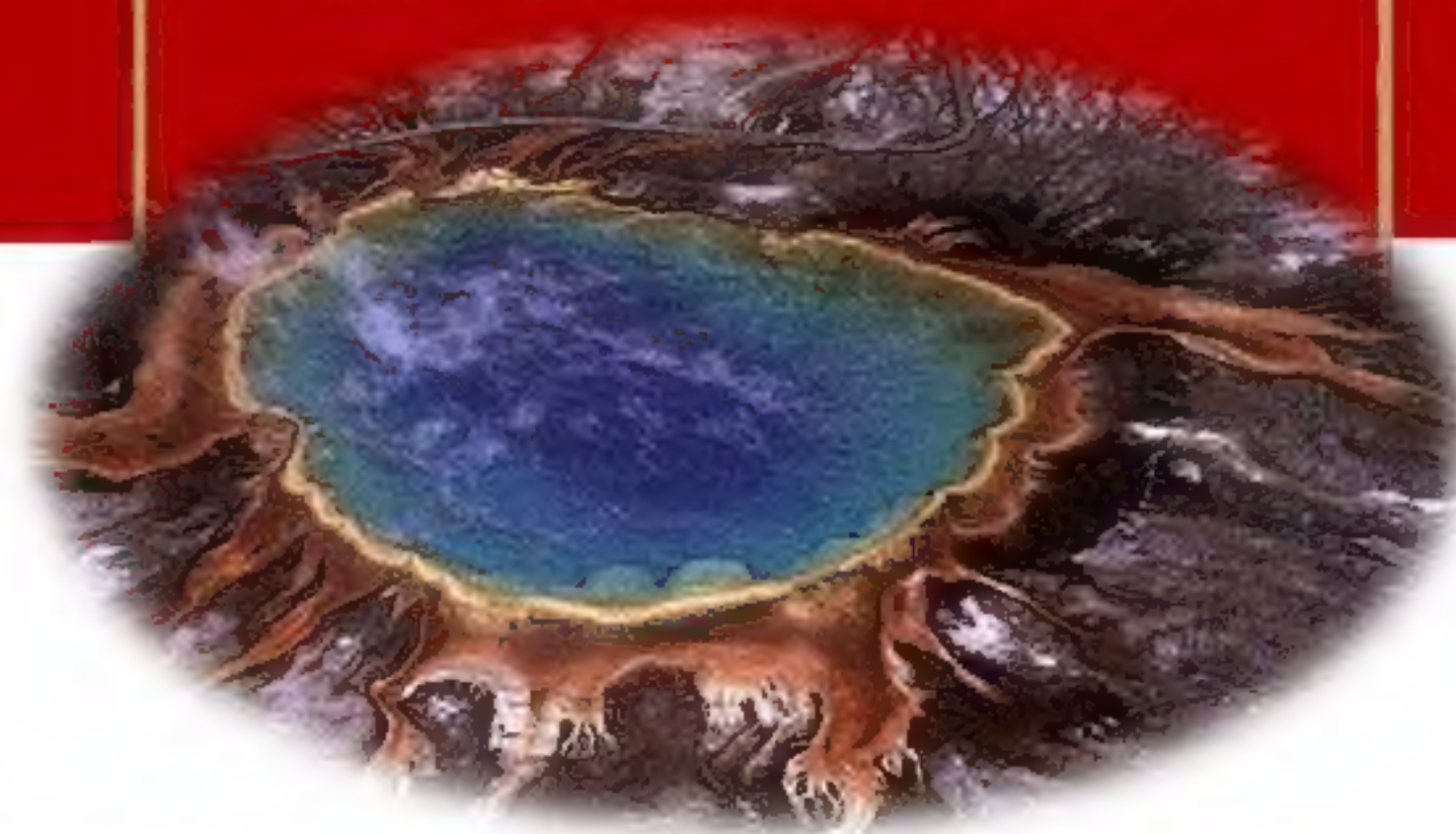
CONDENSED



A QUICK MEAL IN 4.5 BILLION YEARS!

PRIMORDIAL SOUP; FOR THE PRIMITIVE...
AND THE PRIMITIVE AT HEART!

A SIMPLE, SELF-ORGANIZING MEAL WITH
EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO GET YOUR LIFE
STARTED BEFORE THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL PASSES BY.
GREAT FOR ALL WATERY PLANETS, SERVE HOT
WITH LOTS OF REDUCING POWER AND A
GOOD DOSE OF IONIZING RADIATION FOR
THAT UNIQUE MICROBIAL FLAVOR!



Primordial

SOUP

NET WT.
10 3/4 OZ.
(305g)

INGREDIENTS: WATER, SILICA, IRON SULFIDE, HYDROGEN SULFIDE, CARBON DIOXIDE, HYDROGEN, POTASSIUM CYANIDE, POTASSIUM ACETATE, FORMALDEHYDE, ADENINE, PROLINE, ALANINE, METHANE, CARBON MONOXIDE, AMMONIA, SODIUM ARSENITE, GLYCEROL PHOSPHATE, ACETYLENE, ACETALDEHYDE, HIGH MOLECULAR-WEIGHT PAH'S, PYRENE, MAGNETITE, PHOSPHORIC ACID, WOLF'S TRACE MINERALS. AND NP-40.

JWB MOCK SOUP COMPANY, RALEIGH, NORTH CAROLINA JAMES_W_BROWN@EARTHLINK.NET



1251-108-10



WHERE ENZYMES
AVAILABLE



0 51000 01251 7

I could use this mission to study Nick's transceiver.

Or stay here and fix our blackout problem.



I haven't noticed any blackouts.

Really? They're brief power surges. We had three last night.



Three...last...
ni...



I **really** need to study Nick's transceiver.

And one today while you and Nick were stuck in the elevator.



I insist on accompanying Nick. I should have looked into this earlier.

Into what?

I think he's causing those power surges.

How? Is something setting off —

Oh.

We **use** that elevator!

It was cozy!

Thimblefuls of Beer

© 2020 Daphne Eftychia Arthur

reel

A

B

History: Inspired by Artie's line in the 2020-11-14 *Skin Horse* strip, and comments posted there by other readers.

<http://skin-horse.com/comic/housebroken>

Sorry that dumbass
Baron dragged us
into this.



Don't be.

Your friend
gave us an
excuse to
check up on
Tigerlily.

Dunno
if he's
a friend.



If he's
important
to you, I'll
go to war
for him.

You'd go to
war over how
high people
should climb
stepladders.



The top
step says
"not a
step"!
Clearly!

I'mo
start the
beverage
service
early.



Tigerlily was last
seen invading Seattle.

Risky
move.

There's a
method to
her madness.



Tigerlily's brilliant.
Strategic.
Ruthless.



Subtle,
not so
much.

Listen! It's a
funk cover of
the "Frasier"
music!



Out of my airspace
until the city council
meets my demand for
fealty and a fondue
set!

We're not
from the
city!

Tigerlily? This
is Tip Wilkin,
requesting permission
to land.

Tip Wilkin.
There's a name
I wasn't expecting
to hear.

What the hell. At least
I'll get my cheesy
dips.

Don't
call us
that!

Let me know if you have any... reactions here.

Whaddya mean?



Tigerlily's creations are mostly clock-work, so you might not affect them...

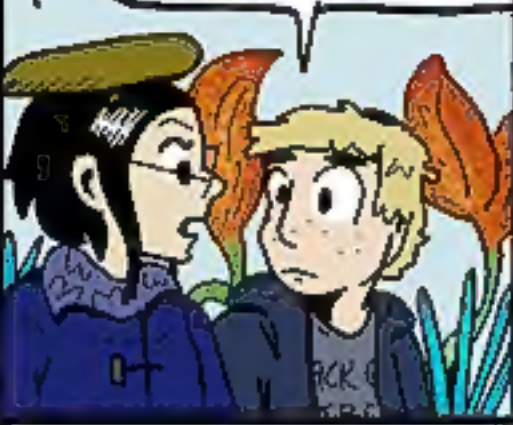


...but your transceiver can connect to more than your aircraft body.



Shit, is that what I did to the copier?

The copier?



It kinda maybe prints pictures of your butt. It's... romantic?

Smoke rises from Colma, the hour grows late, and you honky cats come to oust me.



For I dig that is why you have come!

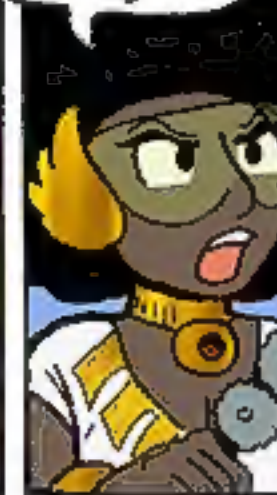


We don't mind you occupying Seattle.

I do...



Bannerbot!
Do your thing!



I get a lot of use out of this honey.



Oh, this is a **fun** conquest.



We're not with the government anymore. We're here for Baron Mistycorn and—



Hold a tic. A **plaid** outfit. I'm weren't you in a different outfit? incapable of clashing with my surroundings.

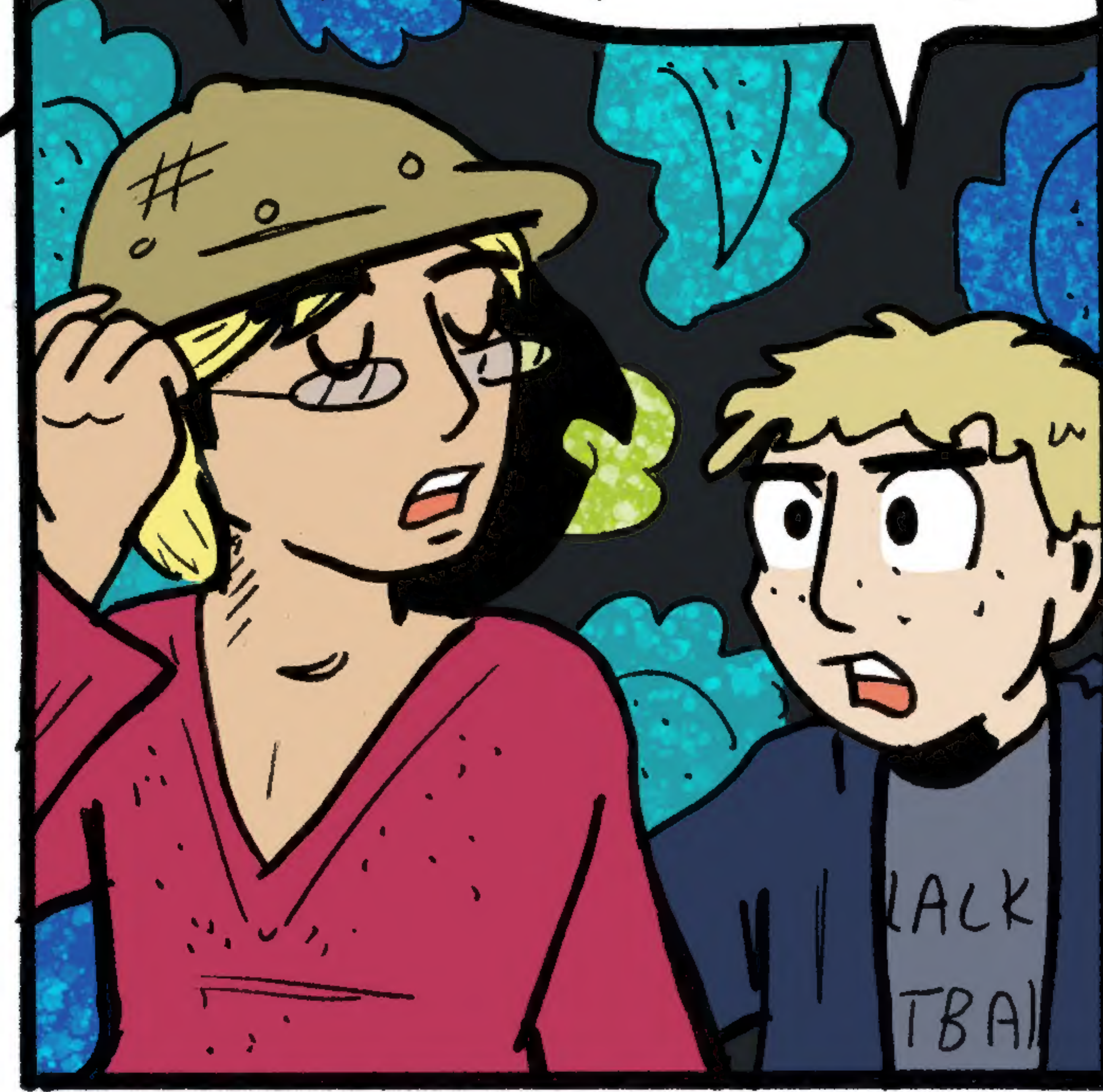


You're a trip, hambone. Come on in to the Jungle Room.



Told you.

Fine, yeah, you know diplomacy.





Shutterstock Images & Getty Images
Van Donge - art

We're
here for
Baron
Mistycorn.

The jive pony?
I did you a
solid by
popping him
in the cooler.



Did he
have a
server?
A box
yea big?

Sure did. Said
he had to get
it to somebody
called Pavarie.



I told him I don't
listen to anybody
named after a
dance I won't do.



Sound
advice.

Got it from
Funkford
E. Chicken
himself.



Don't worry,
I haven't
heard from
Pavane
either.

Never said
I didn't
hear from
her.

I said I
didn't **listen**.

What?!
What'd
she
say?

That I'm
a lost
princess
of ancient
Lovetron.

But that's
what you've
always
said about
yourself!

Exactly!
Why listen
to what I
already
know?

If Pavane confirmed
your beliefs, I
guess you're
in her
corner.

Other
way around,
cop dog.



When somebody says
just what you want
to hear, keep an
ear open for the
twist.



You
think
she's
lying?

I think she
doles out the
sweet truth
and not the
stinging truth.



Wait, do
you know
she's a
swarm
of bees?

I assume
everybody is a
swarm of bees.
Keeps me on
my toes.



Can we
take
Baron
off your
hands?

Go ahead. All
he does is
harsh my
robots' mellow.



And
the
server
?

You mean
this little
box world
of electric
people?



This kingdom that
that fell in my lap
for me to rule with
a velvet fist?



Sure,
take
it.

Um...
why?

You think I
want to rule a
Square world?



Hey,
Baron.
Also, what
the hell.

Before you
get all
judgy, let
me explain.



Aimee sent me to
butter up Loony
Bin Pam Grier,
and I **did**.



I helpfully pointed
out all the crap
wrong with her hair
and clothes and
music and robots.



Can I get
judgy **now**?
Cuz I'm
doing that.

Telling
people
how they
suck is a
courtesy.





Thimblefuls of Beer

Daphne Efrachia Arthur
arr Paula Goodwin

Reel

Violin I *f*

Violin II *mp*

Viola *mp*

Violoncello *mp*

This system contains the first three measures of the piece. The Violin I part begins with a forte (f) dynamic and plays a melody of eighth notes. The Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello parts provide harmonic support with a mezzo-piano (mp) dynamic, featuring a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes.

4

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

This system contains measures 4 through 7. The Violin I part continues its melodic line. The Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello parts continue their accompaniment. The Viola part shows a change in texture with more sixteenth-note patterns in measures 5 and 6.

Thanks for agreeing to let Baron go.

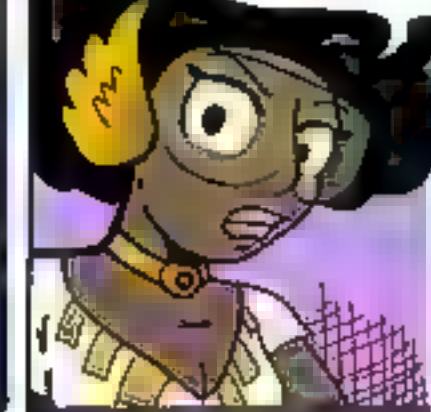
Don't thank me. I was doing him a solid.



Purple brother's headed to Kansas through A-Sig space. He won't stand a chance.



Day will come he'll **wish** he was still in my least fun dungeon.



What penal code infraction gets you in the fun dungeons?

Always got your mind on something penal.





Problem:
we don't
have land
transport.

Solution:
you do
now,
turkeys!

Behold! Traverse
the unhippest of
occupied land in
perfect stealth!

Where...
where
did that
come
from?

Built it
just now.
Its name is
Mercury J.
Buchanan.

Not a
very
stealthy
name.

What else are
you going to
yell when it
misbehaves?

I don't think this is going to work.

Don't be fooled by its square appearance! MJB has lightning in its veins!



This baby's loaded with clockwork defenses. It'll get you where you're going.



No, I mean you built a van on top of a 600-foot tower.



You see problems, I see opportunities to test the shocks.

We'll use the freight elevator!



Hello, Baron.
May I run
a diagnostic
to make sure
you're okay?

Can't wait
to get your
hands on
me, huh?

Of course
you're
thirsty
for a real
stallion—

'Scuse
me, Gin.
May **I**
run a
diagnostic?

SWAY

You're
cute when
you're
showing
off.

I'd better
check the
hardware—

WHAT THE
HELL?

Aha! I **knew** something
screwed you up!

Yeah?

The chick! She
turned you into a
beta cuck!

You got laid once
and betrayed
our
bro-hood!

No!

He got
laid
many
times.

Does she
have to be
here?!

Yup.

OCTOBER 1, 2007:

Five days ago, I thought of a comic. Want to help write it?

DO I!

I haven't told you what it's ab—

...and **then** you draw a castle made of office supplies...

On New Year's Eve, 2007, we began a bold experiment.

It's a secret sequel to Narbonic, but I use the F word!

Needs more helicopters.

A story neither of us could tell alone, something more than the sum of its parts.

MAKEOUTS

ANIMALS
N
HATS

We learned to work together.

MORE OF BOTH

MAKEOUTS
ANIMALS
IN
HATS

We got a lot of help.

This is Pancha! She's going to color our strips and design our books and save us a billion times!

I am?

We met new people.

This is Robin! He's going to puke on the art!

blrg.

But we always planned for an ending, however long it took us to reach it.

...and then Nick says the line I wrote ten years ago!

And then Sweetheart wears a hat!

And then...

Oh, hey. We're done.

Turns out it takes about 13 years.

So that's it. The Skin Horse finale, coming in 2021.

Or thereabouts. There's some wiggle room.

Thanks for sticking with us!

See you at the end!

So what's your next idea?

Long nap.

I'm telling you straight, skirts are poison.

So help me, Baron, if you don't shut up...

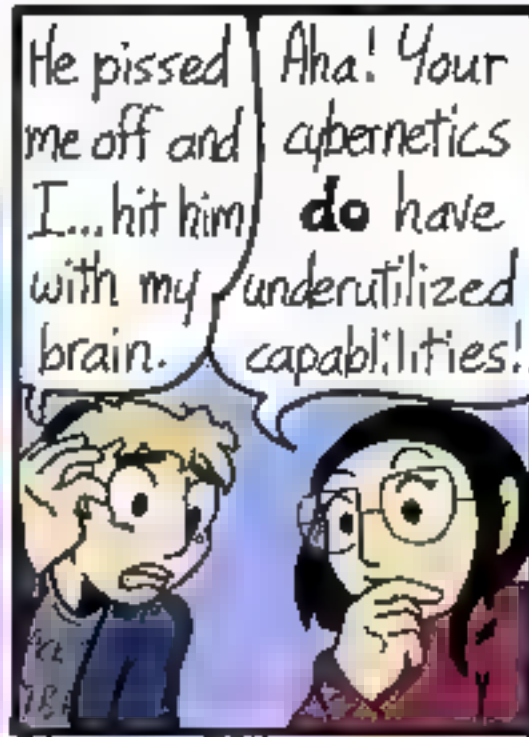


You'll what? Is your meat chass's good for anything but poking skanks?



oh crap oh crap
I guess it is.





There are some modern electronics in here.

Whimsy upgrades. Added every few years for IP reasons.



If I reroute around these diodes ...

—don't have the stones to what the **hell?**



I had to repair-

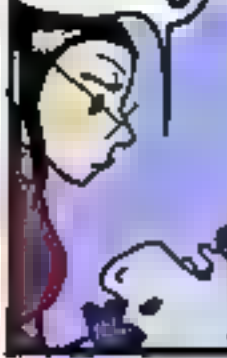


Back off, toots, I'm rebooting.

Dammit, can you say **one** nice thing?



From this angle, your boobs look friggin' **amazing.**



They look amazing from every angle!



I think
this was
caused
by—

Yeah yeah yeah.
I don't need
tech support
from some
boseulachi babe.



Baron—

Wait, do you
speak Korean?

Sure.



I'm programmed
with every language
in Whimsy's World
Pavilion of Peace
and Niceness.



And what
uses you've
found for
your gifts.

I can
also hit
on foreign
chicks.



Is Baron getting worse,
or is my bullshit
tolerance
dropping?

He's lashing
out.



He was imprisoned,
his mission was
derailed...and he
clearly envies you.



What, just cuz I'm
banging the hottest
supergenius on
earth?

Ahem...



He's right.
Sucks to be
everyone
who's not me.

You could
be discreet
about
it...



Looks like your crew's crashing here for the night. Care to join me in my royal chambers?

I don't know.



I love being with you, but you don't feel as deeply about me. That's hard on me.



You're getting honest with yourself, Wilkin. I respect that.

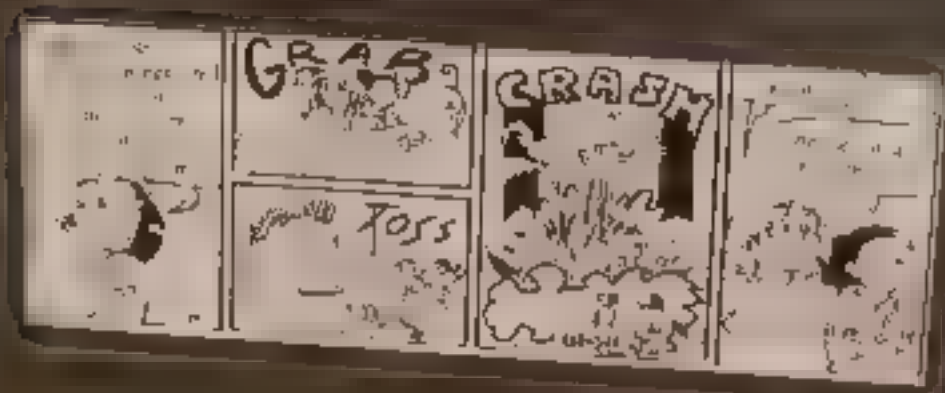
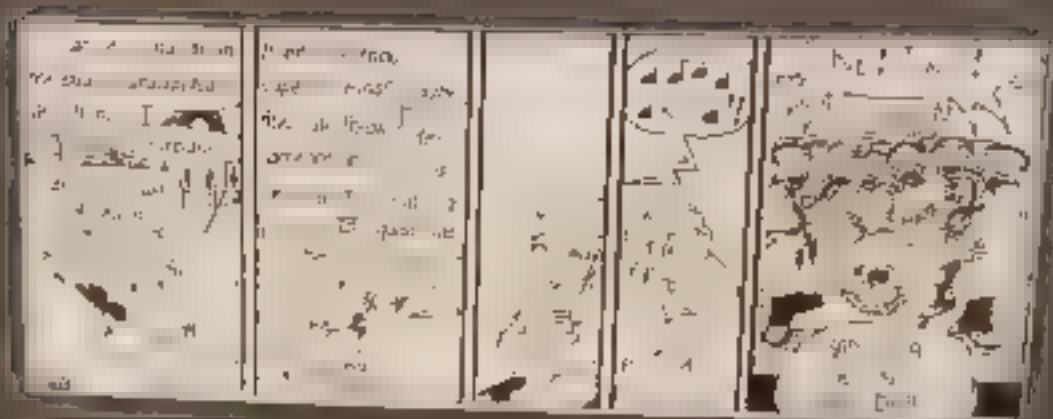
Thank you.



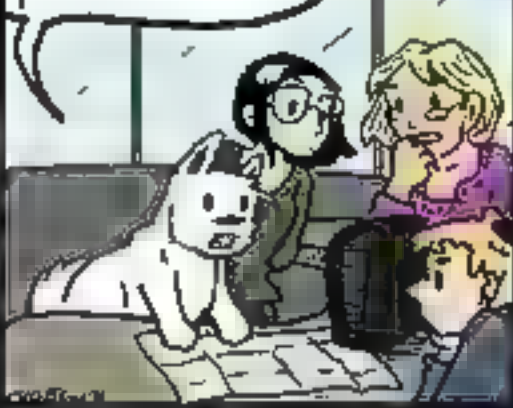
Flipside: I've got a waterbed.

May as well test out.





Tigerlily's right. This cargo's too precious for us to be predictable.



We can cut south through the Mojave. Give Groom Lake a wide berth.



If we're careful, no one will be able to suss out our route.



And if we make good time, we can hit Vegas!



No one except anybody who knows us.



...aaand I'm clear of Seattle.

Hopefully A-Sig will follow the aircraft, not the microbus.



How far can you go from... you?

Dunno. If I lose contact I can bounce off a satellite.



Doesn't that seem... weird?

No shade but you're a talking dog.



But I've always been a talking dog.

And I've always been awesome. Do people not pay attention?



Baron?
Baron!
You okay?



Geez, calm
your teats.
I was
with Aimee.

For a sec I
thought I
shorted you
out again.



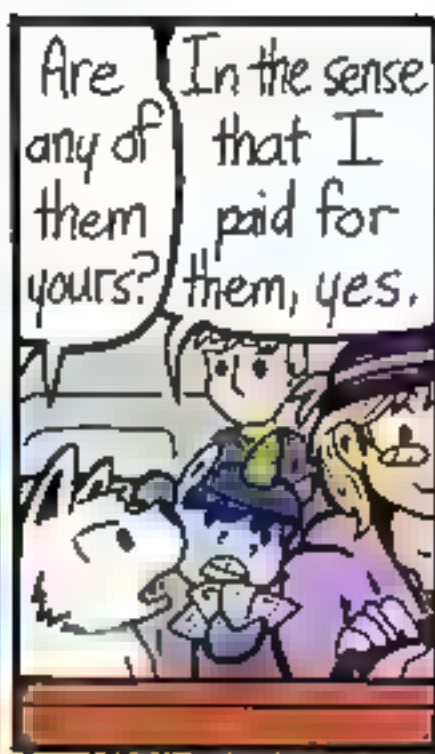
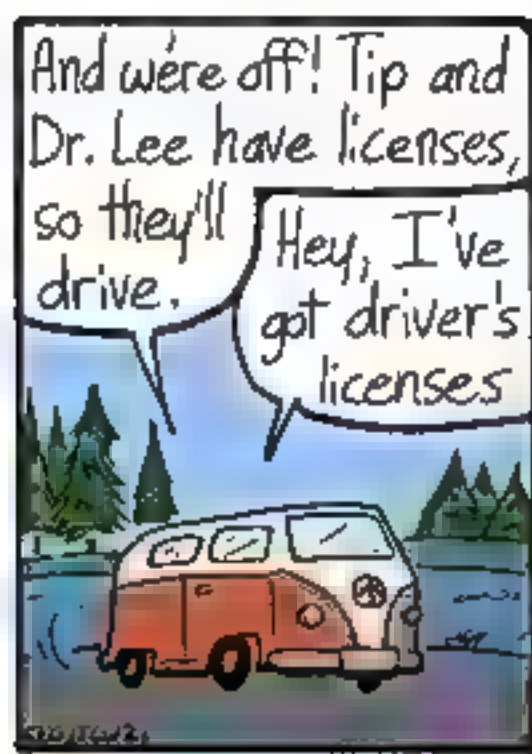
Ego much? Not
everything is
about you,
Zerhacker.



I just told
your girl double
all the ways
you suck.

Gotta
keep
me
humble





Lemme be clear:
I'm only with you
yahoos 'cause I
got a job to do.



I don't
wanna hug,
or grow,
or learn
crap.

In that
case, we
must stop
at Vegas.



Did you
say
Vegas
?

It's the
capital of the
unexamined
life!



Great. The two worst
people have Voltroned
up.



VE-GAS! VE-GAS!

I want
hookers to
feed me
crab legs
and gin!

Sounds
unsafe for
a robot,
but okay!



Oh man
this is
gonna
rock.

Behold the
lights of
Sin City!



Sin #1
is how
overhyped
you got
me.

Strange. By now
a bachelorette
party should
have solicited
me.





What the hell's going on?

We'd better check it out.



We may need to intervene on behalf of the local sapient's.

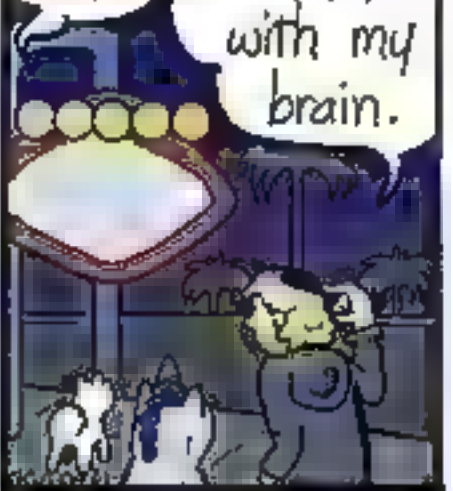


If the world's ending, I'mo intervene on some half-shell oysters.



For the last time, **you don't eat.**

Not what your mom says.



Good one. I can destroy you with my brain.

What
nonhumans
are in
Las Vegas?

Slot
machines,
believe it
or not.



They
form a
limited
neural
net.

Looks like
A-Sig shut
down the
casinos to
seize them



Monsters! This is
the last straw!

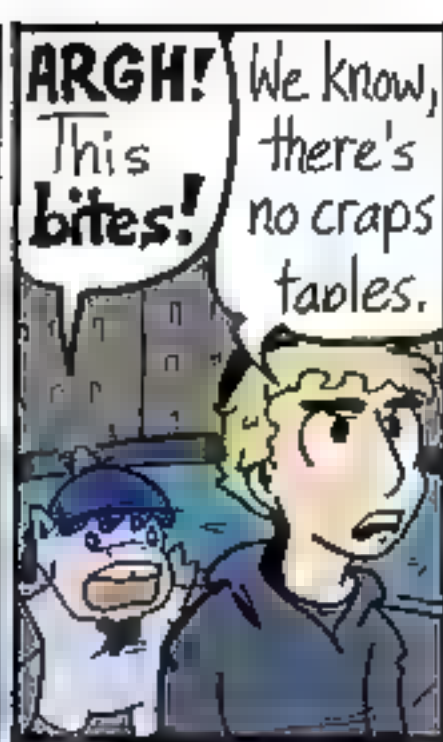
'Cause you
can't gamble?



I can't
gamble
or see
showgirls.

Well, time to
see if there's
any booze
left.





I just can't. I just can't even.

Sigh... I'll escort you back to the bus.



Splitting up feels like a bad plan.

I'll run a quick check on Baron's circuitry.



You two finish sweeping the Strip. We'll meet back in twenty.



So! Let's talk relationships! Oh yeah. **That's** why it's a bad plan.



You and Virginia
seem to have a stable
long-term
relationship.

On hell.



I want
to
commend
you.

You make
it sound
like I won
a spelling
bee!



It's something
that's eluded me,
who knows why-

Cuz you're a
jackass.



I mean
besides
that.

This is exactly
how bad I
thought a Vegas
vacation
would be.



All the sex
I've had with
Tigerlily
isn't enough.

"Amazing,"
they'll say.
"He died
of cringe."



How do
you form
a true
bond?

Hang on.
Are you
asking me
for dating
advice?



You've been
Yes! with like a
million women!
You've been with
my girlfriend!



Would you
trade places
with me?

Not on
your melon-
farming
life.





Should I go
on seeing
Tigerlily?
What are my
boundaries?



How the
hell
should I
know?

It's the actual
apocalypse, dumbass.
The rest of us got
real problems



Like, what if she
says yes but I
can't get a chuppah
that matches the
flow...um...



eeeeeee

Shut up. **You're**
in a war zone
picking out caterers.



You
okay,
Baron?

Yeah, yeah.
Get off
my tail.



I just need to
log in to Aimee's
World and—



klik



Wow, yeah.
This is
already
better.

It'd be
wrong to
snuggle his
tummy, right?



This city is
so eerie
when it's
deserted.

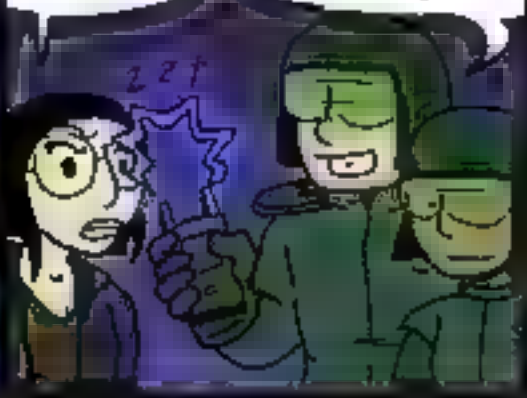
At
least
it's
quiet.

I'd feel better if
we weren't so alone.
If I could see
one or two
people...



Not you
people.
Other
people

Finally,
some
excitement
in Vegas!



Come
along
quietly,

Don't
insult my
intelligence!

That's a cartridge
taser, and you've
used your cartridge.
Without reloading,
you can't —

KONK

They're funny
when they try
to be smart.

That's
why we
don't
try!

What do we have here?
Altered canid, human accomplice.
Probably lovers fleeing the sweeps.



Yeesh. Aw, look!
A Baron Mistycorn stuffy!



Must've won it at Circus.
Eh, let's get to the Boneyard.
No need to invent stories.



Who decided they were "lovers"?
Okay, no inventing stories unless they're cool.



Gin?
VIRGINIA
!!!

Signs of a
struggle.
This looks
bad.



WHERE ARE THEY?
WHAT HAPPENED?

Hey, Baron's
still here—



WHERE'S MY
GIRLFRIEND, YOU
ASSHOLE TEDDY
RUXPIN?!



He's remarkably
stoic.

WAKE UP! I'VE
GOT MORE BURNS!





He's catatonic.
Don't panic. I'll
try to bring
him out.



Hi! I'm a unicorn
who's disconnected
from external
reality —



That was a
valuable therapeutic
tool!

And I feel
better. Thanks.



Baron's not here. He's in Aimee's server.

We have to talk to him.

Then we're S.O.L., 'cause we don't got any meat-compatible VR equipment.

Whaddya think, I can lay hands on the server and magically access-

Okay. Yeah. I'm in.

I know nothing about computers, so I'll assume this is normal.

Are you all right?

I'm good. Just keep an eye on meatspace.



On it. Your physical body is safe.



Ain't gonna be able to keep up my end of the convo.

The sh*t going down in VR is gonna take my full attention.



To reach the castle, you must out-hopscotch **all** the bunnies!



I swear she keeps adding more of this stuff.

Princess, this visitor
requests an audience
with—

NICK!

Hurry!
We need
your help!

What
is it?

We have to replay
all the Resident
Evils before the
new one comes out!

You're in a
video game...
playing
video games?

Sometimes
I wonder
if we really
are brain
clones.



How's the trip to Kansas going?

Not good. Hasn't Baron kept you updated?



I ain't seen him in days.

But he's here all the time! He's jacked in now!



Not on his main account. I'd get pinged.

He snuck in under an alt? Why?



Dunno, but user 7IndigoInchz **does** trace to his account.

That's his horn size, and why do I know that.



What's going on?

All-out garbage fire!

My boss and my girlfriend are gone, only Baron might know where they are, and he's AWOL!

What?!

So we need to track him d—

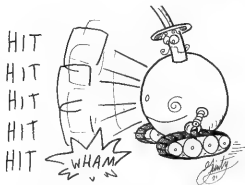
You have a girlfriend?

eeeeee

Can we go do heroics already?



over



Where's Private mode.
Baron? Citizens can
build their own
sandbox worlds.



Can we go there,
or is there some
weird game rule
keeping
us out?

What?!



My world follows
the cold logic of
code! It's simple
to get around!



Of course, we have to
fly on a giggle—
powered
buttercat.

I love
this place.



You've done remarkable work here, Aimee.

Aw, nah.



This is one of the most well-designed AI communities I've visited.



In fact, if we survive all this, I'd like to -



Look out! Rain of hamsters!

Yup, definitely want to live here.

Their little feet are everywhere!



Baron's
in there?

I think
so.

It's locked by
the user, so we
may need to —

fzzp!

Nick, did you
do that, or
did Baron
let you in?

Either
way, it's
good,
right?

Wow, you
do **not**
know
Baron.

He's nice
with me!

Keep the cat running. I'll check things out.



Nick! What's it like in there?

Oh crap...



Stay out!
Don't come in!

What?!
Why?!



You don't want
this algorithm to
dress you!



...maybe
Lovelace can
come in.

Baron!
There
you
are!

Welcome to
the Golden
Horn Casino
and Convention
Center!



Okay,
I need
to know—

Enjoy two
drink tickets
and a pass to
the Rainbow
Lounge!



Wait.



One
more
time—

You look
stressed.
You didn't
use the
drink tickets.



Hands
off the
staff!

The
hell?

Watch
it. We
got eyes
on
you.

Baron
populated
this place
with mobs
of himself?

That's
the most
effed-up
thing.

Hey, big
spender. Want
a private
gaming
session?

See, I
always
talk like
three seconds
too soon.

For an extra
C-note I
can set up
a Mario
Party.



Okay okay okay. Do you dupes have the original Baron's memories?

Ha ha, no!



Unpleasant thoughts are cleared to make room for more vital concerns.



Which Mountain Dew: Baja Blast or Code Blue?



Diabetes is coming in through my eyes.

Ah, a Pitch Black man!



One of you
has to be
the real
Baron.

Who
cares?
Stay!
Have fun!



I gotta
make a
plan
here.

We
game for
wealth
and prizes.



Of course, the
real prize is
the **ladies**.



Step one:
a long,
hot shower.

Good idea
from the
monkey!



Baron!
Where
are
you?

Somebody
want to see
the boss?



Yes! I'll do
anything!

Then step behind
the curtain...

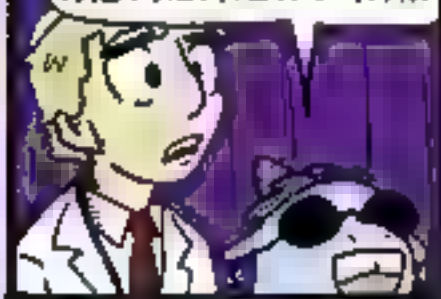


...and get in line for
The Awesome Life
and Times of Baron
Mistycorn: The Ride!



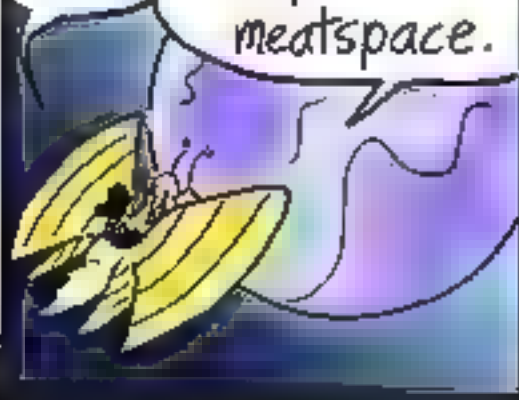
I couldn't gouge
out an eye instead?

You need both eyes
to fully absorb
the A.L.T.B.M:T.R.!



Nick's been in there a while.

We're moving at A.I. speed. Not much time has passed in meatspace.



Even so, we should check nodes are, on him. well, private.

Okay, but private nodes are, well, private.



I hope we don't see anything that'd embarrass Baron.



Oh, there'll be humiliation for all.

Why aren't both those fountains Baja Blast?

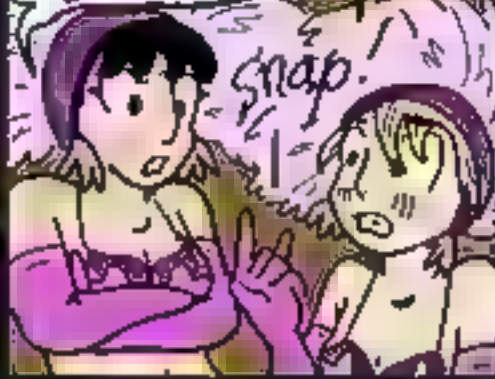


Whoa, this place
is... a lot.
Better find Nick.



First, could we
change into
something more
dignified?

Sorry!
Hang
on...



Let me specify
what I mean...

Oops! Forgot
the glitter!



Nick! What have you been doing?

Standing in line for this thing!



Why's a casino even have rides?

It's a Whimsy mod. Don't worry, nothing here should be fatal.



I hope we get the back car! It's so **romantic!**



You sure about that?

If it gets scary, I'll hop in your lap!





When you think
of the 20th
Century's greatest
achievements, what
comes to mind?

The Hoover Dam?
The polio vaccine?
Sure, those are
great.

But all pales before
the creation of
BARON MISTYCORN!



We're under
where his nads
would be and
I'm not okay
with that.

A partial
list of
other things
less great
than
Baron...



He's famous and amazing. But do you **really** know Baron Mistycorn?



NO! BECAUSE
YOU'RE IDIOTS!

SW
SP
LURA

Agh! Yuck!
What is that?



Oh, cool!
The ride
simulates
his angry
spittle!



He's a
robot!
He can't
spit!

No, but you
have to
admire the
implementation.



It's not
even
a real
ride!

Baron was the magnum opus of Dr. Collodi, founder of Whimsycorp.

Nice theming on the workshop.



Conceived as an icon of bravery, he was also built with a knack for video games!



But Pong wouldn't be invented until 1972, so he was pretty bored for a couple of decades.



This **does** accurately simulate decades of boredom.

Someone's salty about our weak Pong skills.



Look! Animatronics of Baron's short-lived sidekicks!

Why make VR copies of animatronics of robots?



The layered artifice forces a confrontation with the hyperreal.

Ooh, *Simulacra* and *Simulation*!



Yes! It's a perfect reproduction of an imperfect copy!

So third-stage Baudrillard.



Great. I'm in here with cuter, smarter me.

I get bored sometimes and read all the books.



This isn't ~~too~~ bad. Why is it upsetting you?

I'm not upset! Who said I was-



Baron reminds Nick of himself, duh. And Nick doesn't like it.



Baron's like his nerdy dark side.

Can you stop being smart now?



I figured it out while writing an erotic friendship shipping them.

Nope, this is worse. Go back to being smart.



So Baron Mistycorn
reigned as Whimsy's
most beloved
creation.



...That is, until
the mob came
for Dr. Colkodi.



Brave Baron fought
for his creator, but
not even he could save
the workshop from
flesh-melting hellfire.



And that's
it! Visit
the gift shop
on your
way out!



...okay,
but on the
plus side,
great pyro
effects.





Skin Horse
will return on
May 3rd!



We need
to go to
the lounge,
please.

Did you miss
the sign
saying
"High
Rollers"?



It's off-limits
to scrubs —

Excuse me.



-especially
if you're
not
grounded.

Why do we
have bones
in VR?
What is the
logic?



Baron's
gotta be up
with all the
rich and
famous Barons.

So we
become
rich and
famous.



How?

Yes, how
would we
get rich at
a casino?



Omigosh—
you mean—

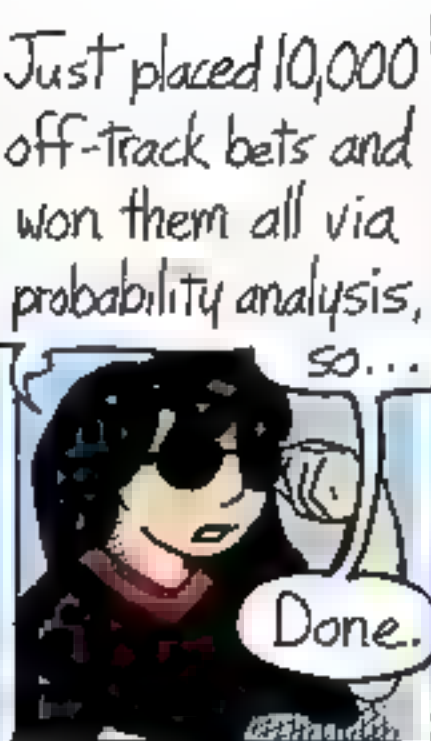
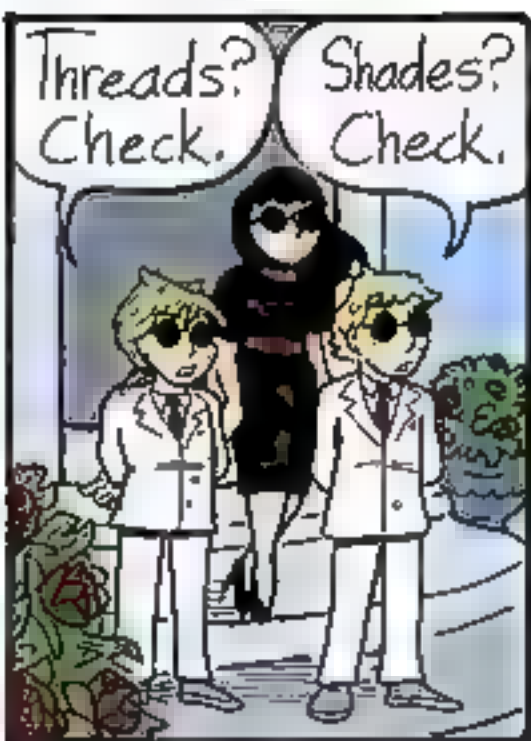
Go ahead and
say it.



Super
swanky
Vegas
montage!

But we'll
have to get
changed.





That was anti-climactic.

Good. We got sh't to do.

Welcome, high rollers!



Welp, this sure is a thing.

I wanted some classic casino drama.



Gentleman. Ladies. Let us discuss your suspiciously enormous win.



Mob harassment! Perfect!

Watch yourselves. You are at kneecap level.



Allow me to be blunt.
We suspect you're
of cheating. How?



We believe you
somehow used
a computer.



Well, **duh!**

This whole place
is in a computer!
I'm a computer!
You're a computer!



We mean
a **really**
smart
computer.



Guilty!

I'm like
half
computer.

Skinhorse presents

Tigerlily Jones





Scram.
I'm in my
happy place.

We've had
just about
enough
of --



Wait. Stay calm.
We're here to ask
a simple question.



WHERE'S GIN,
YOU MONKEY-
SUITED KITTEN
WHISPERER?!



You know
you can
cuss in
here.

THIS IS
HOW I TALK
WHEN I'M
UPSET!



Goons! Rough 'em
up and toss
'em out!



H-how'd
you
do
that?

I DON'T
KNOW!
WANT ME
TO DO IT
AGAIN?!



Wow, hey,
suddenly
I'm open to
nonviolent
solutions.

YOU'LL
PROBABLY
RESPAWN!
THAT
NONVIOLENT
ENOUGH?



Stop it, Nick! This isn't the fight you want.

Pretty sure it is.

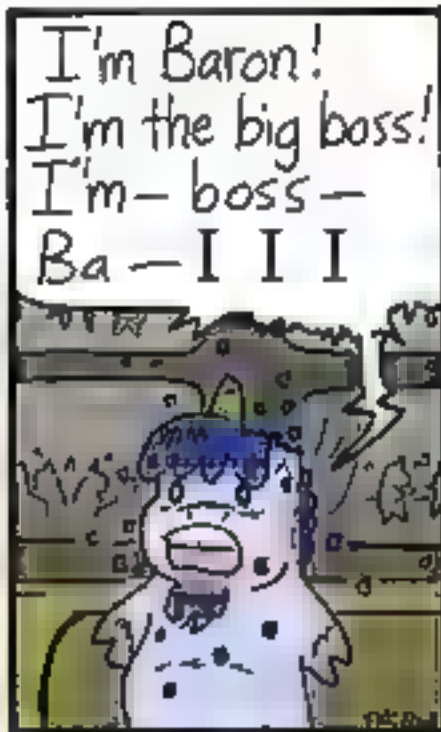
I mean, that's not Baron! It can't be!

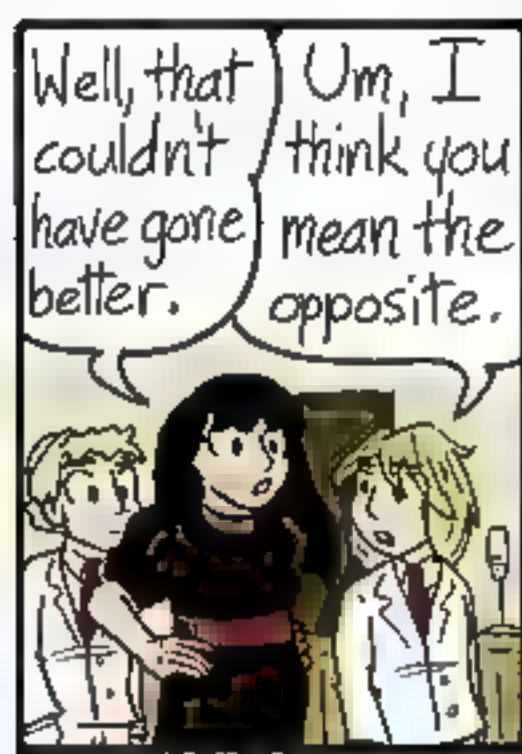
Aimee, he's different with you than with the rest of—

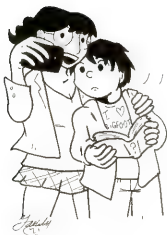
Dammit, she's right. This guy's just game code.

At brunch, he picks Bloody Marys over mimosas every time.

I don't know which of you is weirding me out more.







So that's where Baron is, eh?

Where? I don't see anything.

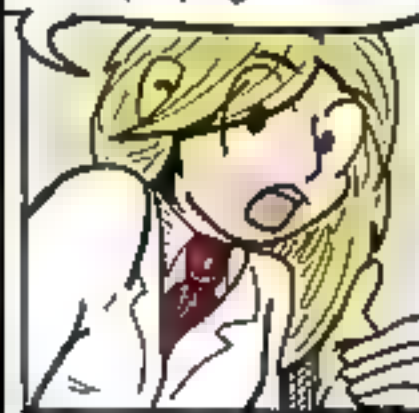


Exactly. There's a camera dead zone in the basement.

Oh yeah!



Okay, squad. Time to find out what Baron does away from prying eyes.



Shit, do I ever miss zombie apocalypses.

Keep your sinister deletion powers on standby.



This has
gotta be
the place.

How do we
get through
the wall?

SCRAM!

You're thinking like a
human. Those "bricks"
are the VR program's
representation of
security matrices.

They should respond
to breaching
software.

KAZIK
XLIK

WRRR

Which you represent as
a jackhammer
bazooka?

Well, yes,
for fun.

WRRR

I can't see anything. It's too dark.

Be glad you can't.

Whatever stanky den Baron has set up here, we're better off not seeing it.

Never mind! These glowing butterflies are leading us through the wisteria!

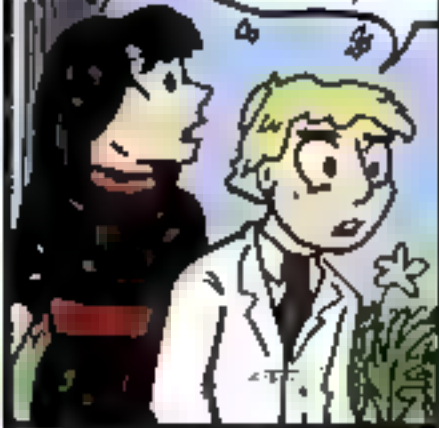
Trust me, this is wisteria of depravity!

I was not expecting a "landscaping by elves" fetish.



This is surprisingly sedate.

Don't let the decor fool you.



This is where Baron goes to wallow in his sickest desires...



Oh. Hey.
It's you guys.



I guess the chains are **sorta** kinky.

By my troth, it isn't a sex thing!



What the hell's going on?

I'm a prisoner! The sub-Barons put me here!



I tried to make a perfect world to escape to, but the NPCs got out of control.



They declared me a bringdown and locked me away so they could party forever.



Rewind to the part where a world of you was going to be "perfect."

At least everyone's good-looking.



You were supposed to report to me! I **needed** you!

I let people down. Haven't you noticed?



But the ride about your life said—

That's the Whimsy version. Pure fiction.



When they came for Collodi, I ran. I left Mary and Gussie to rescue as many cast members as they could.



A themed attraction lied to me?



The part where I dated Ann-Margret? Not true either.





We've been looking for you. Let's go.

I can't! I'm chained here!



I can delete that file.

And there's this fence!



That too.

And my hoofsies are sore!



Do **not** tempt me right now.

Can you materialize a pedi bath?



I give zero shits
about your drama.
Where. Is. Virginia.
Lee?

I dunno.

I've been here!
Ignoring the
outside world is
the whole point.

I've been running
all over this sim
for **nothing?**

Yeah, I g—

PZT
bip

BONG

REBOOTING...



New rule you may not know:
don't tick Nick off when
you're plugged into
the same program.

Got it.



I-I'll check my archived files! My eyes and ears are always recording.

Do it.

Okay...A-Sig was taking the babe and the dog to someplace called the Boneyard.

There!

Was that so hard?

blip

A "thank you" would be nice!

Let's go up to one of the 300 bars and have 300 drinks.

You can't leave me!
Rescue me from
this lilac
hellforest!

Baron...



You literally
imprisoned yourself.
All you have to do
is **want** to leave.



Lovelace is right.
But if there's any
way we can
encourage you...



Cheerleader
uniforms
?

Aren't
you on
chivalrous
mode?



Are you "in" yet?
How can I tell
when—

I'm back.
It's done.

We got
all we're
gonna
get from
Baron.

You were
only out
for
seconds.

Time moves different
in e-space. I had a
whole crappy
adventure in the time
it took you to—

—somehow
change
outfits
again.

I felt a
trend shift
at the
International
Date Line.



I know where
the Boneyard
is.

How?

The Neon Boneyard
was an AI safe-
house. A-Sig
must've occupied
it.

Don't you
carry
the Skin
Horse
database?

In my main
body. Meat
brain don't
remember
that shit.

Good thing
I remember
every place I
got oil stains
on suede.

What
would
we do
without
you?

Argh!

They've
got us
bound!

We're in
luck.



I recognize these
detainment pods.
I helped
design them.



You know
how to
escape
them?

No, but
I put in
nice
cushioned
restraints.



Glad
we won't
cramp
up.



I hope they
use the new
stainless-steel
thumbscrews!



You won't
get
anything
out of
us!

Too bad.
That
makes you
worthless.



If you're a couple
of nobodies, you
can be eliminated
and no one will
care.



Need help
with the
fusebox?

No!
Stay there
and be
disposable!

Searchlights
are down.
Perimeters
are down.

Somebody
get the
power on!



I am **FLOGGING**
done with bullshit,
you wretched
walking worms.



Hi, I'm
here to
translate.
He's cranky.



This place is
a great big
chicken
waiting to
get plucked!

We just want
our friends!

This way.

How
do
you
know?

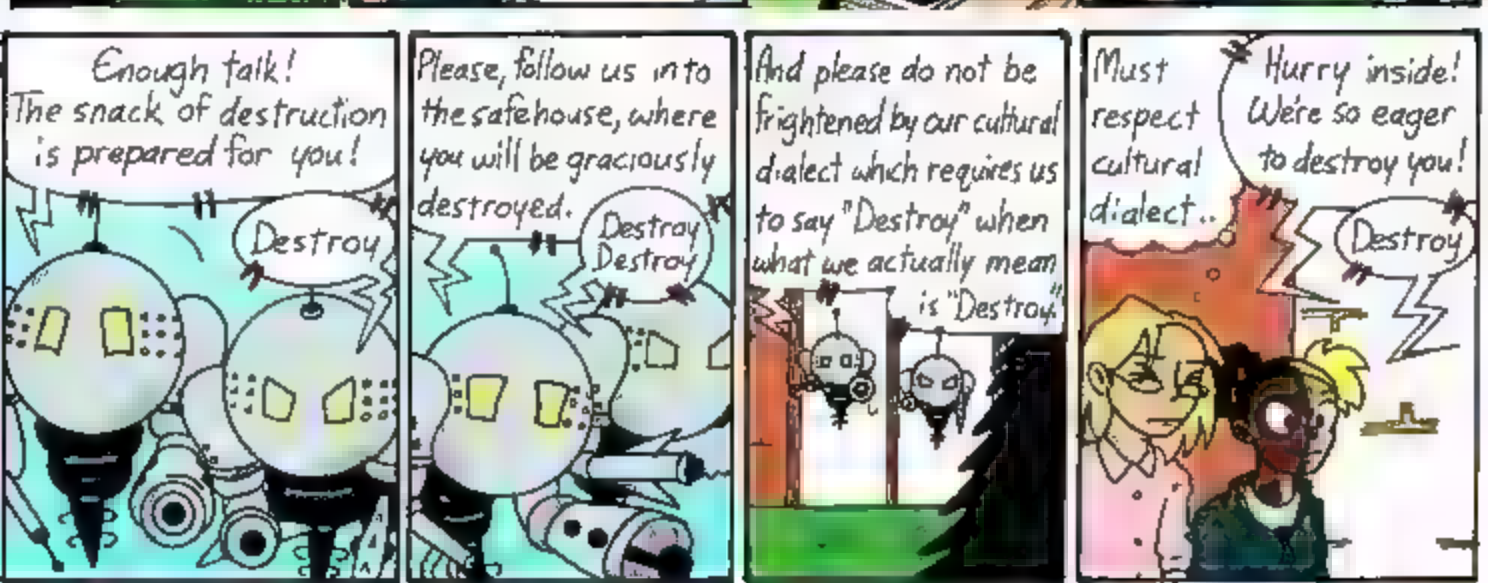
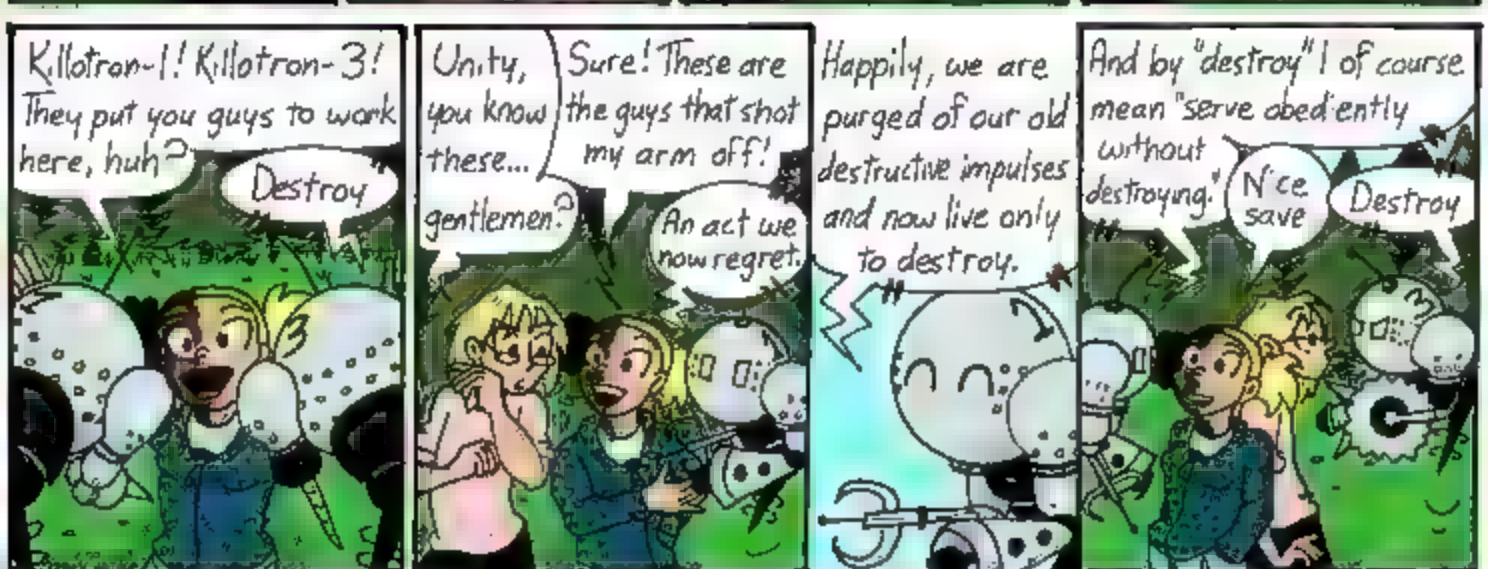
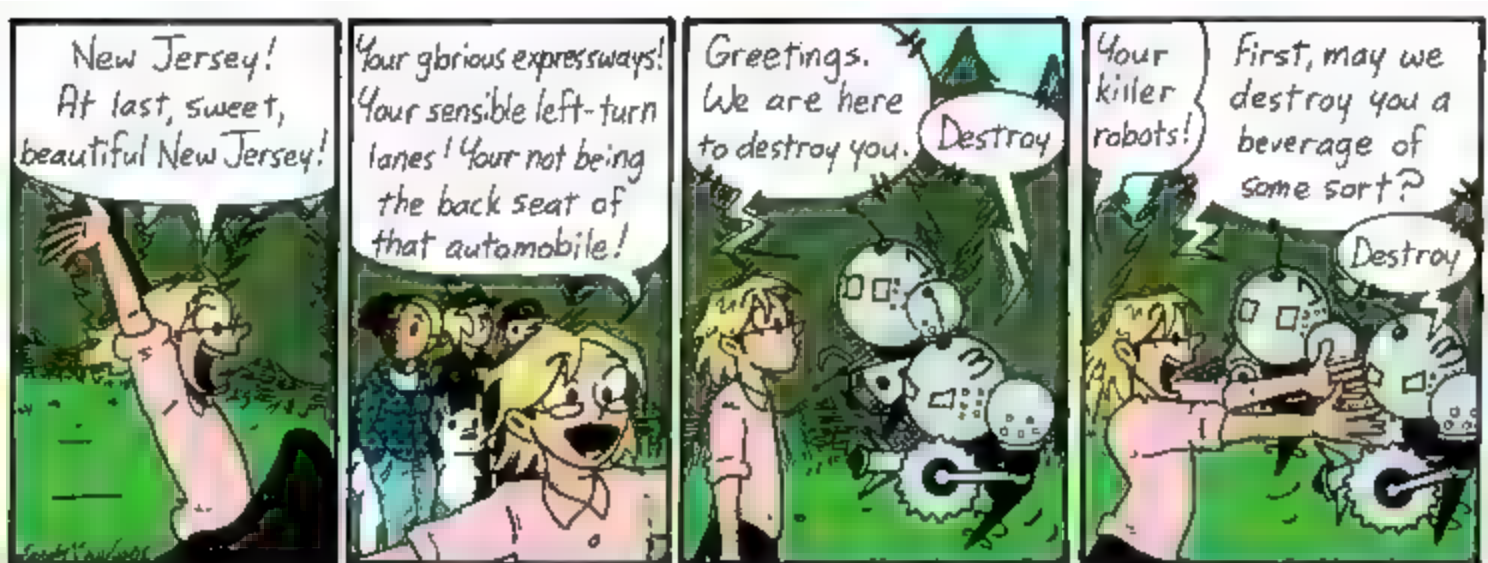
Security
grid.
I'm in
the system.

That's...
really
cool.

But it takes a
lotta concentra-
tion, so I gotta
drop the body.

Less cool but still
very interesting.

When we find
Gin, tell her
I carried you.



Goons ahead.
Nick, can
you walk?

I'm busy.
Just hit
'em with
something.



THWACK

Oog!



THWACK

Oof!



Good
call!

I'm up!
I'm up!



Oh, Nick!
There you are!

Gin!



So, er, I
can offer
a firm
handshake...

Just
get me
out of
here.



These things are electronically locked.

It's Grr's work.
No prob.



Aw, you recognize my code?

I mean it's in my brain.

SNAP

SNAP



I never wrote for sexier hardware.

Holy shit get back in the restraints now.



Get me back to my nice, normal relationship with the undead bioweapon.

I might chat up those cute grrs I clocked.



I hear alarms!
Are we near the
exit?

Probably!



Don't worry!
I've always been
lucky in Vegas!



Lucky in
general, or
just lucky
getting laid?

I can
seduce
three,
four
max.





We're under attack
from unknown

AIEEE



CRASH



Curbside
service, ya
hockey pucks!



Gotta
hand it
to you,
solid
entrance.

I was trying
to turn on
the lighter,
but what
the hell.





Tigerlily
said she
improved
the bus...

Blah blah.
Less blubber,
more rubber.



It's good to see
you standing up
to your fears.



Now, if you'll let
someone who can see
over the dashboard
drive—
Piss off.



Standing
up to **me**,
I don't
like as much.

Anybody
know how
to work an
eight-track?



They're after us!

Oh, hey, time for the rocket jets.

KACHOK



How'd you find these gadgets?

Yanked the lighter, a control panel popped up.



I was trying to recharge.

Did Dr. Jones design this bus for Baron to drive?



She **is** an evil genius!

Lemme keep mashing buttons 'til I get a hot tub.



So, um, thanks for
the last-minute
rescue.

Whatever.



Gotta warn you, Wilkin's
gonna yap about getting
closure on your past
and shit.

Ugh.
No thanks.

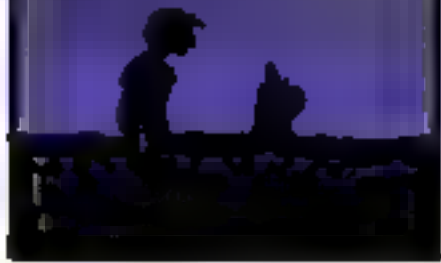


Yeah, that's why
I didn't tell him
Gin just
proposed.

Heh,
yeah.



Wait.
What?



All the formerly cool people are going mushy on me.

Life happens, asshole. People change.



I don't!

You did kinda save folks this time though.



Sheesh. I'll be in the wedding, but only for the bridesmaid action.

Hey, who else is "going mushy"?



I'll blow on your dice, but it's just the VR representation of a probability calculator.

Please.



Text from Nick?
We're on the road and he mined a ton of data from the Boneyard.



We can use the info to help local AIs.

And since when do I trust you with royal data?



Have I given you cause to doubt me?

Literally constantly.

From day one.



Buuut ...? I need you here so we can cosplay as Sarah and Jareth at this summer's PalaceCon.



We **do**
make a
decent
team.

It's pleasant
to work with
an AI of your
caliber.



Ditto.
100%.

Our
heuristics
are...
complementary.



Yup. Heuristics.
Just what I'd say.

When paired, we
approach optimization.



Also, your
avatar
is legit
smoking.

Oh, good,
because the
tomboy princess
thing drives
me **wild**.





Um, Baron,
if we could
stop to
eat —

Robots
don't
need food.



Or a
quick
nap —

Don't
need
sleep.



Baron —

Definitely
don't
need that.



Oh,
hey!

**PORN
&
FIREWORKS**



Fine, I'll eat the
edible underwear.

Finally got through to Annex One. Wifi's been wonky.

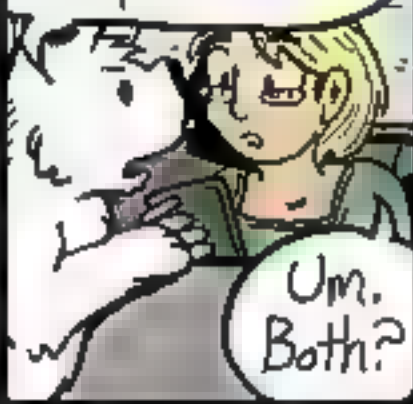
You're telling me.



They had a crisis to handle, but they'll rendezvous with us in Kansas.



A nonhuman refugee crisis, or a "Unity saw something shiny" crisis?



I want 'em all to sleep in my room.

I'm sure Sweetheart will enjoy that.



Thank you
for assisting
our effort
to destroy
Kansas.

Don't freak.
That's just
how these
guys talk.



Killbots from across
the nation have
destroyed to be
here.

See?



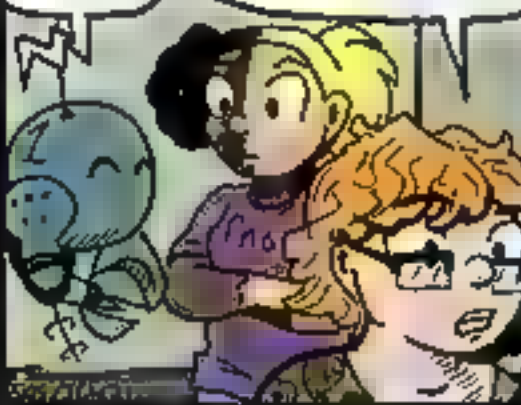
We are
eager
to
destroy
you.

Okay, gonna
need some
confirmation
I'm reading
you right.



Destroy
you
very
much!

No offense,
but I'm moving
out of the
blast zone.



C'mon out
We made
it.

Whoa,
really?

Dunno why this
Pavane wants us
to meet in the
ass-end of
nowhere...

What
the hell,
asses
are great.

I wasn't
going to be
the one to
say it.

Babe!
You made
it!

'Course.

Wild
scene,
huh?

Where'd all
these people
come from?

All over! Some
came with us, some
hitched their way
here...

... and then
there's Miss I-
Can-Charter-a-
Jet-from-My-
Aircraft-Carrier.

Cry
more,
losers.

joy!

fnord

fnord

I've never seen so many different sapients in one place.

It's a concern.



A-Sig has mind-control tech. What if "Pavane" is a ruse to lure us here?

Worry not!



Pavane is real, and she is coming for us.



Okay, new concerns now.

Have a pamphlet on the subject!



This is Nick.
I made him.
He breaks things
for me.



And I
bang'er.

Later, Nick.
On the
rains.

Mad science possums!
I thought you
exploded!

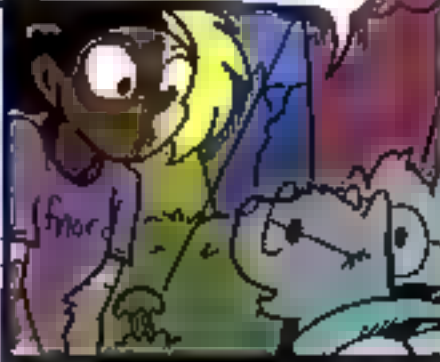
Not at
all!



We achieved perfect
attunement via the
Groovitron and were
converted to
massless astral forms!

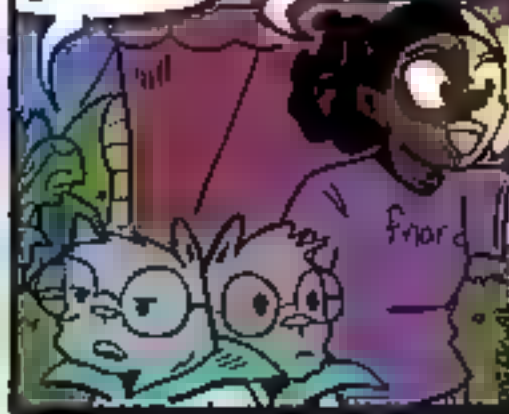


From there we located
the funk frequency
of the Mothership
and reconstituted
aboard... er...



We
exploded
but we
got better

Rock!
They got
a churro
stand here?



Don't try to tell me
you teleported into
outer space!

Is that so
strange?



Oh no! You won't
get me with that.
I won't be so
open-minded my
brains fall out.



I can be a talking
dog who lives in a
giant robot and
still think your
thing is weird.



Don't worry
about her!
Your thing
is awesome.

Ignore
my
zombie
girlfriend!



Ah, this must be Aimee's World!

Pavane is **quite** curious about this community.



Back off, roadkill!

And Baron Mistycorn! Pavane awaits you, too.



Yeah? She down to clown?

She's a swarm of bees.



So there's hope.

Not for anyone who says "down to clown."



Revanants! Beastfolk!
Machines! Lend us your
sensory equipment!



We are living proof
of Cosmognothics,
bringing you tidings
from the stars!



Soon the Mother-
ship comes! The
Loading begins! And
we escape this
hostile world!



"Help start full-on
UFO cult" was not
on my lifetime
bucket list.



Really?
You're weird.

Before we go further,
major issue: who here
plans to take Pavane
up on her
offer?

Not me!



Even if it's real,
it's ridiculous.

I go where
babe goes.



Yeah, um, this is
where Gin and me
invite y'all to our
wedding.



On
Earth.

New major
issue:
EEEEEE

You don't
get to
plan it!



Aw, let Tip
dress you!

Would **you** leave Earth?

I don't think I can. The invitation is for nonhumans.

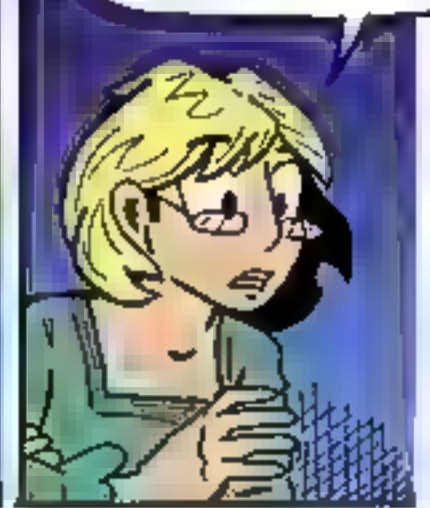


But would you?

I don't know. Things are bad and most humans don't know or care.



Maybe the world needs the people who care.



What you've mostly done for me is recommend conditioners.

I care about your split ends, Sweetheart.





Gavotte, I'm not moving from this spot until I get answers!

Very well.



I demand to hear everything you know about Pavane.

Yes, let's chat.



...What?
...Really?

Of course.



So I don't need the tent and the economy-size box of Milk-Bone.

I'll put them out with the tea.



We bees came from Lovetron 100 million years ago to study life on Earth.



We were intrigued by the emergence of intelligence in a certain promising species.



Humans? No, octopuses, but they weren't interested.



Can't blame 'em. After a lot of wet one-sided conversations, we tried humans.



After an epoch of studying Earth, we found something astonishing.



Your intelligent life was **creating** intelligent life, and not in the standard sexual way.



I was entranced by these new life forms and vowed to protect them.



But you're d'istracted because I said 'sexual.'



It's like Mary Poppins narrating a porno!

When the Old War came, I pondered how best to help nonhuman sapient.



Half of me wanted to evacuate them to safety. Half wanted to forge peace on Earth.



So I did the sensible thing and split myself in two.



On what planet is that sensible?



I told you. Lovetron.



Why did I have to demand answers?



Pavane
is part
of you?

A daughter
colony. I
stayed here
while she went
to Lovetron.



We agreed that if
I failed to build
a peaceful world
here, she would
return.

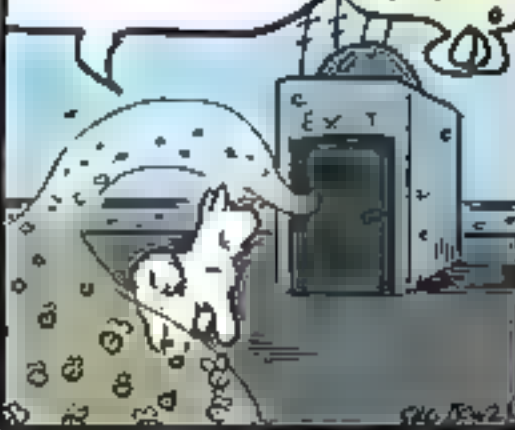


And
now
she's
back.



And I
have no
successes
to show her.

We won
Black Ops
Team-Building
Paintball twice.



Too
little,
too
late.

Gavotte says
her daughter
is coming for
nonhumans in
a space ark.

Do you
believe
that?

Whatever I think,
it's triggered the
biggest gathering
of nonhuman
sapient's ever.

So
what's
our
move?

If we make
some into
jerky they'll
keep through
the winter.

"Eat
everyone"
is not
a move.

Wow, **so**
glad we
talked this
over first.





We can't flit off to outer space! There's so much to fix **here.**

How, though?



By getting humans to care! Raising awareness! Making you feel **seen!**



Don't know why two people in an empty field need 20 beer kegs, but here's where ya sign.



Yeah, we all gave up on that and chose booze.

Not gonna ask why you need the 50 port-o-pots.



Face it, faith
in humanity
is a non-
starter.

They're
being
mind-
controlled!



Anasigma has a
device that turns
human reality
filters up.



That's what we
should do! Disable
it and get humans
to see nonhumans
again!



So they
can
aim
better?

Let me get
my contact-
hypothesis
puppets.



Can our computer people trace the A-Sig reality blindness signal?

We've been trying.

It's elusive, and we have limited processing available.

You need **real** computer people.

Are you dissing my cred?

No, we got a server full of advanced sapient AIs.

Aw, Nick! You've got friends!

Now you're dissing **my** cred.

Will the AIs want to help?

I ain't good at talking, but Wilkin can persuade anybody.



I don't know. I'm not sure we should exploit these people.



Given my position of relative privilege-



In the VR you can wear any princess thing you want.



Can I wear... **all** the princess things?

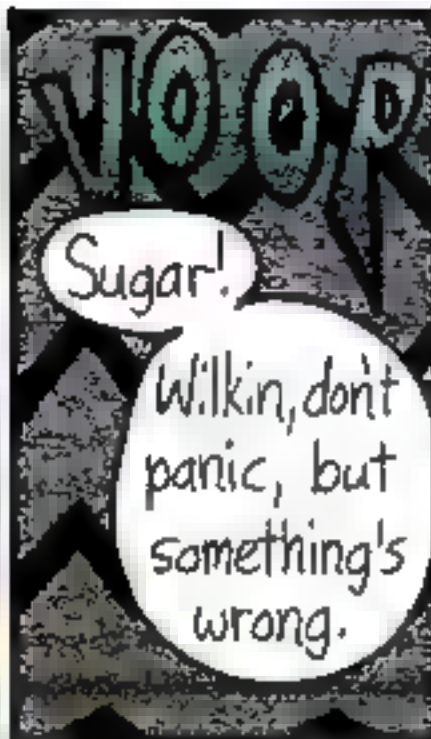


Fudge, maybe I **am** good at talking.



Hope this goes better than the last time I used this thing.

This'll be way smoother. Going in **now**.



I'll say!
I wanted the crinoline a **touch** stiffer.

I like the décolletage, though.

Yup, real smooth.



Welcome to our sanctuary! I'm a little busy for the full intro, but —



EEEE!



EEEE!

EEEE!



As a copy of me, you are **not** allowed to like Wilkin!

Teach us your beautiful stranger!





Locate the
brainwashing
signal?
There's an
idea.

I prefer
our chances
with
Pavane.



Well, we can see
if anyone's into it.

You're still hanging
around, Lovelace?

Aimee and I find
it advantageous to
interface and
integrate our
codebases.

That means
we're hecka
doing it.

Guess who
cross-
compiles!



Now, uh,
you're a
thing?

Our status
is hard to
express to
physical sapients.

We meld
on a
mental and
spiritual
plane.

It's not
analogous
to any
human
relationship.

What I'm asking is,
are you each other's
plus one for my
wedding?

EEEE!

Don't make
me keep the
mission on
track! I'm
bad at it!

Is it a
Klingon
wedding?
If not, I
call dibs.



Done! We've traced
the reality
blindness signal!



Thousands of AIs,
working in sync, pinpointed
the source of Anasigma's
covert tech at...



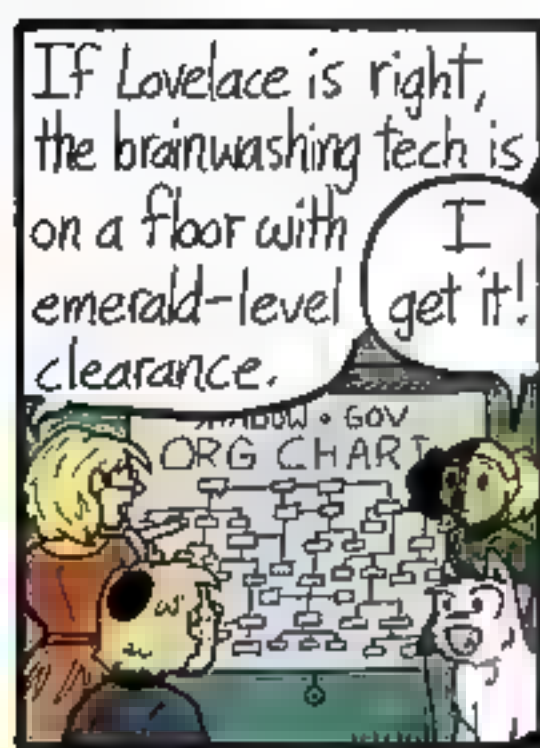
Anasigma HQ,
Maragda Building,
Washington, D.C.

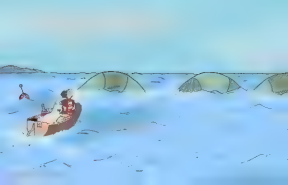


We live
in an
age of
miracles,
You know how
many Bitcoins
we could've
mined with all
that?









Wilkin can't infiltrate A-Sig! He'll be clocked immediately!

Not sure about that.



Anasigma's attacking on multiple fronts. They'll have a skeleton crew at HQ.



With luck, there won't be anyone at Maragda who'd notice our agent.



Our agent is a guy in taffeta who constantly talks about himself.

Can we talk him into some sort of camo frock?



If this has any hope
of working, Tip has
to avoid
Mr. Green.

No prob.



If the intel we
ganked from Vegas
is right, he hasn't
been working at
Maragda.



That's
great!

For once,
he won't be
where he can
cause maximum
harm.



Welcome to St. Charlie!
Which of our critical
systems would you
like to tour?

Yes.



We're pleased
to host reps
from the
Institute!

The
pleasure
is ours.

For years, we fools
at the Institute
laughed at you
mad scientists.

But now we wish to
apologize and offer
you this large, whirring
gift.

Shall we
open it here
or in our
fusion core?

You're
the
geniuses.
Your
call.



Why **did**
the
Institute
hate us?

We didn't.
In fact,
you've been
invaluable.

The Institute has
been exploiting you
lunatics for tech.

We owe our military
might to your
dangerous, reckless
experimentation.

I invented
six new
flavors of
buffalo wings!

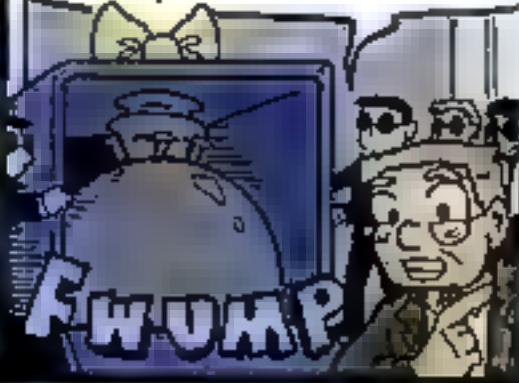
Hm...
perhaps
after
V-Day.

And this ventilation system provides air to the entire city!

Finally.



Now to hook up this disburser engine and release a gas that'll stunt your intellect!



blink
olink



You mean this was a **trick?**

Not sure we needed to make the effort, really.



Hey! The beauty part is, we'll neutralize your kind with your own gadgets.



Take the disburser. Some madman built it to spray people with werewolf gas.



We're using it to flood your city with the Cure.



We really prefer it when **we** do the monologuing.

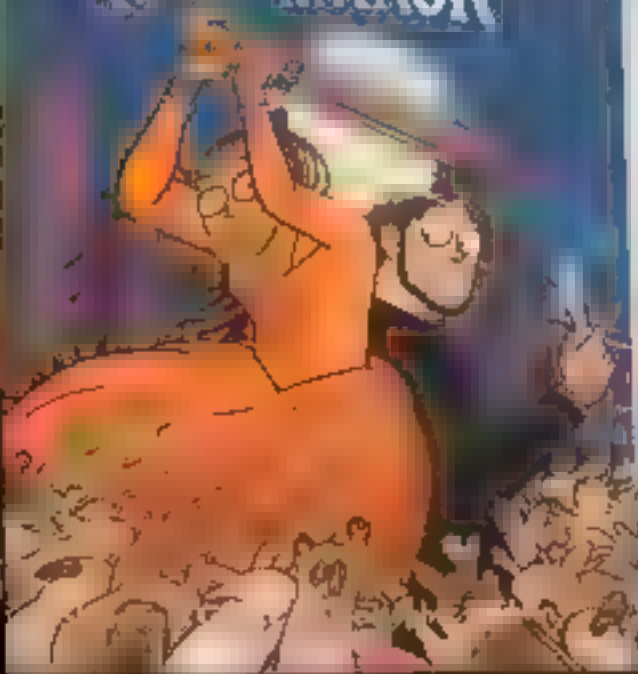


Get used to it.



Young Adult

THE DIRT DAYS OF
WILLOWWEEP
MANOR



HERU

GRANT
LIGHT

GRANT
FEAR

GRANT
PLAGUE

GRANT
PLAGUE

GRANT
LIES

Coverquade

HOON

Book Jumper

Forcejump Book

GAUMAN
STARDUST

Ultimate Graune 381

1981 1 12 2 4 11

1981 1 12 2 4 11

JOABINZEN

DOMINA BARBER

FINARI

FINARI

LEGENDARY

Even the creator of the mad-genius cure hesitated to use it on her peers.



Captain Kinlin!
Come in!

Personally, I find it's always an improvement.



Send a fleet of your attack bicycles!



Er, ma'am? What's an "attack bicycle"?

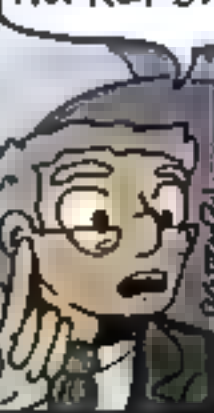
See? This fellow's already more tolerable.



But as long as I'm here, let's talk bike chain maintenance.



Slightly. We're not miracle workers.



Ah, glad the gas worked. Mad geniuses have been resistant to our other control methods.



Nonhumans like yourself are immune, so I'll have to flick your off switch **here**.



Ha! That was my off switch **years** ago! I rerouted it!



So, er, what does that switch do now? **excellent.**





Here, Dr. Phillips. I fixed your Hawaiian-themed gas masks.

You still need to test them!



Evacuate! Invaders are flooding St. Charlie with toxic gas!



ESSSH



I mean on Hooray!

someone other than me!



You two may be
the last insane
humans here!
Isolate this car!



Doors
locked!
HVAC
sealed!

Good! Make
it impossible
for anything
to get in!



My dear Dr. Ruby,
we're in St. Charlie!
Nothing is
impossible!



How
did
you-?

Running gag
amplifier.
Just invented
it.



What's wrong with Kinlin? He looks positively sane!



Workin' hard or hardly workin'?

The Institute cured him. Our fears have come to pass.

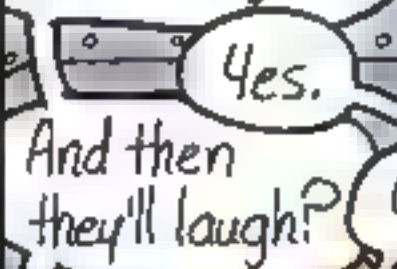


They'll take over St. Charlie?



Yes.

And destroy us?



Yes.



And then they'll laugh?

Yes.

CURSE THOSE FOOLS AT THE INSTITUTE!





Shirley Con. Con 2021



Shirley K. Garity for Con. Con 2021

You're telling
me everyone
in St. Charlie
is **sane**?

Everyone
human.
But don't
panic.



We retain a sane
escape pilot for
emergencies. You
there, Joshua?

Yup!



My dogs told me
to seal the hangar
and rev up a
rocket pod!

rrf!



Sanity
is a
spectrum,
huh?

We are so
lucky to
have that
man.



Stay calm. I'm getting an escape pod ready.



I'll send a pair of dogs to fetch you.



The attack dogs that routinely eat residents?

No, the unpredictably motivated service dogs that sometimes give out love maulings.



Thanks, we're fine here.



Sundance says he can't wait to say hi.

Out of the frying pan, into another frying pan with bigger teeth.

That's St. Charlie.

Captain, we need to move, okay?

Of course! This is an emergency!

Yes! You know?

I parked my bike in a damp, rust-promoting spot!

We're under-water, so yeah.

This is pretty much what he was like when he was mad.





*You fetched them!
Well done, recruits!



*Humans are bad at staying alive.	*So bad.
---	-------------



* True. Now load
them into the mass
driver and fire.



* Are we part of the problem?	* Not our fault they don't listen.
-------------------------------------	--

Hurry!
Into the
escape pod!



You're not
coming with?

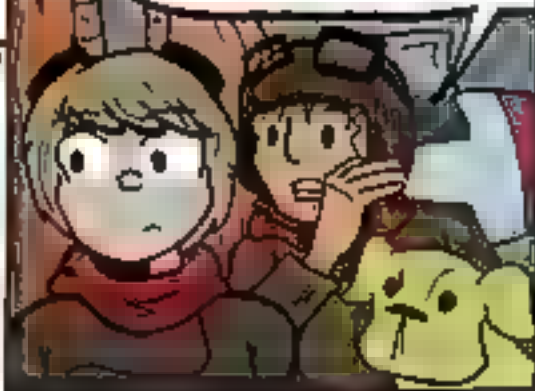
Joshua and I aren't
affected by the gas.
We'll stay and
continue evacuation.

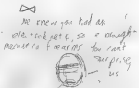
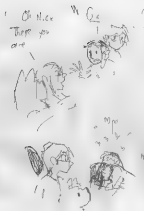
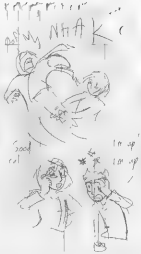


Ah, we geniuses are
too valuable to risk.
That's why you're
eager to get us away.



Yup. Sundance says our
survival chances
increase the farther
we shoot them.





And
fire!



Where
does the
escape
pod go?

Up through
the Charles
River.



If Sundance is
correct, it'll surface
through the U.S.S.
Constitution.

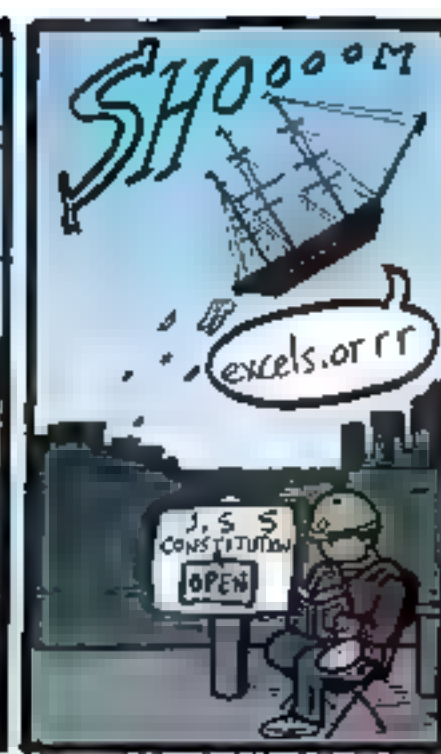


Don't
you mean
near the
Constitution?



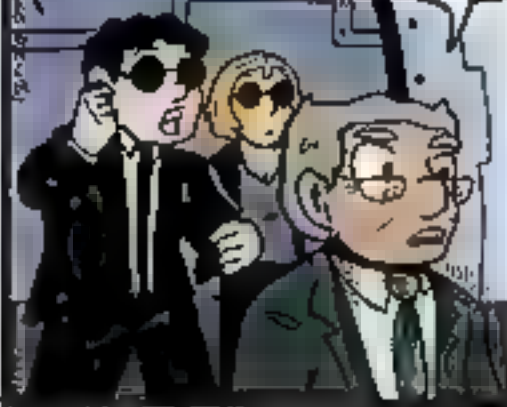
The language
of dogs...so
loose and
poetic...





Sir! We've
had a few
escapees.

No matter.
We have
what we
came for



All that
cutting-
edge
weapons
tech.

But we
cured
everyone
who could
make more.



Yeah, what
if there's
another
war?

One way
or another,
there will
be no more
wars.



I'll choose
to interpret
that
positively!

Oh, good.
Tell me
how.



An armory! This would be easier if we still had Virginia Lee.



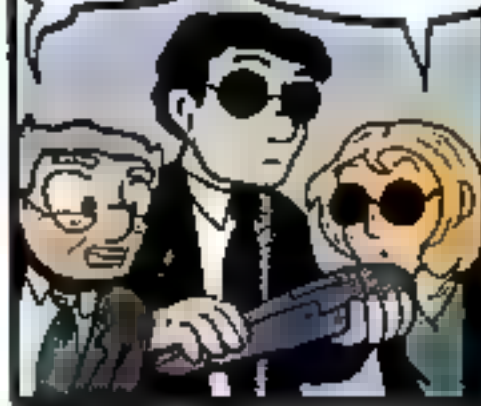
Ah well. We'll work out functions as the best we can. This one's labeled.



"Club that makes people's knees explode."



See, not that different from a regular club. I want three.



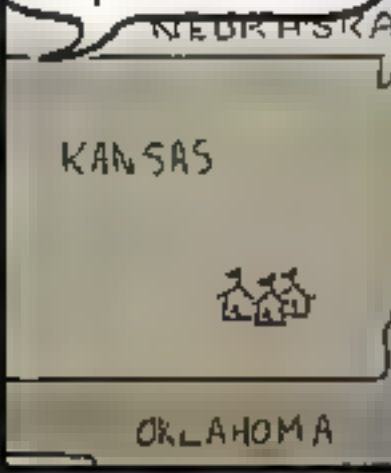
We've neutralized St. Charlie and have the Necropolis under control. That leaves two major fronts.



The Carbondale Biomass, a human-hating biome out to devour all life.



And some kind of hippie tent city in Kansas.



And you're not sure which one's the bigger threat?



My money's always on the hippies.



Well! We, uh, wouldn't know anything about that nonhuman rally, sir!

Or, um, anyone who's there now!



Like, say, a rat we're kind of dating!

That'd be crazy! Ha ha!



Good. I'm sending you two to level the place.



Think he's on to us?

We didn't just text him flirty emojis!



Yaaah!



Refugees from St.
Charlie here! We
seek sanctuary!



We just fled a
disaster that
destroyed our
entire city!



And this
time it
wasn't our
fault!

That's what
you said
after Death
Rays for
Kids Night!



At least we
don't have to
fight the
plant monster.

We're going
to Kansas!
Valiant's
there!

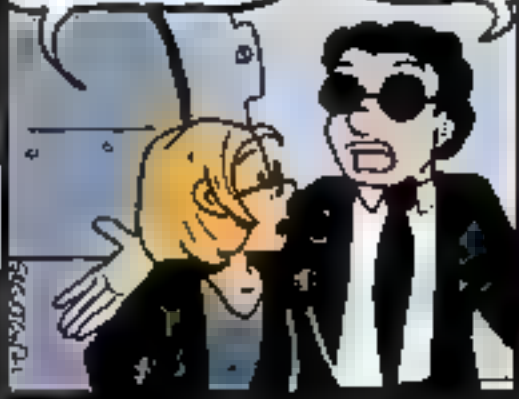
So
we'll
warn
him.

What about
his friends?
His family?

Knowing him, he'll
try to stay and
rescue everybody!

Being a
goon used
to be
simple.

This is the
worst way
to meet the
parents.



...so now
the fools at
the Institute
have our city!

And A-Sig
runs the
Institute.



Could St.
Charlie's tech be
used against
a flying
saucer?

Weirdly
specific
question,
and yes.



The place is jammed
with weapons. Now
they're in the hands
of ruthless military
intellects...



I pushed
all the
buttons and
burned off
my clothes.

Another
trip to
Black Suit
Warehouse



Echo Bravo. Haven't you left for Kansas?

About that, sir... could I be reassigned?



Cold feet? Whaaat? No! I'd just rather join the Pennsylvania mission.



That reminds me. Charlie Sierra, drop a nuclear device on Pennsylvania.



You were saying? I'm packed for Kansas.



Reports are in from
the scout rhizomes.
Shall we
interface?

Brief us
verbally.



Anasigma is
withdrawing. They're
running
scared!

Perhaps.
Perhaps
not.



But they
left only
a small
force—

Trouble
can come
in small
packages.

SHLOPP



That's a
nuke!
An actual
nuke!

Mm.

Did you
hear
me?!

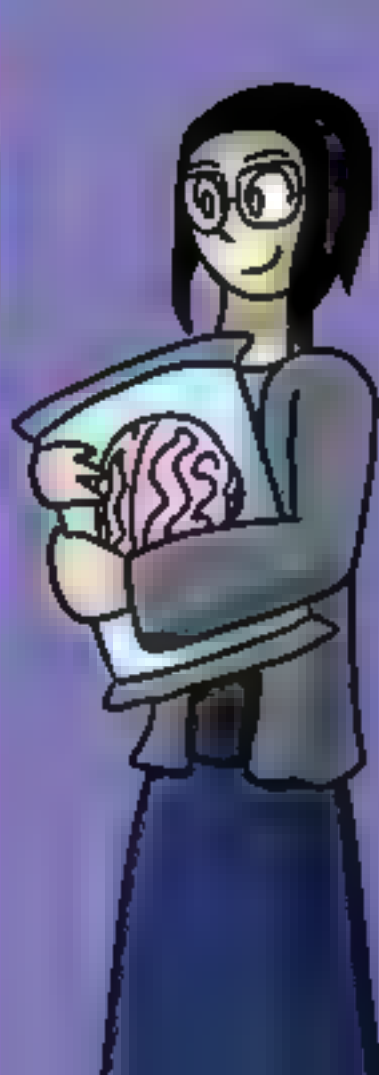
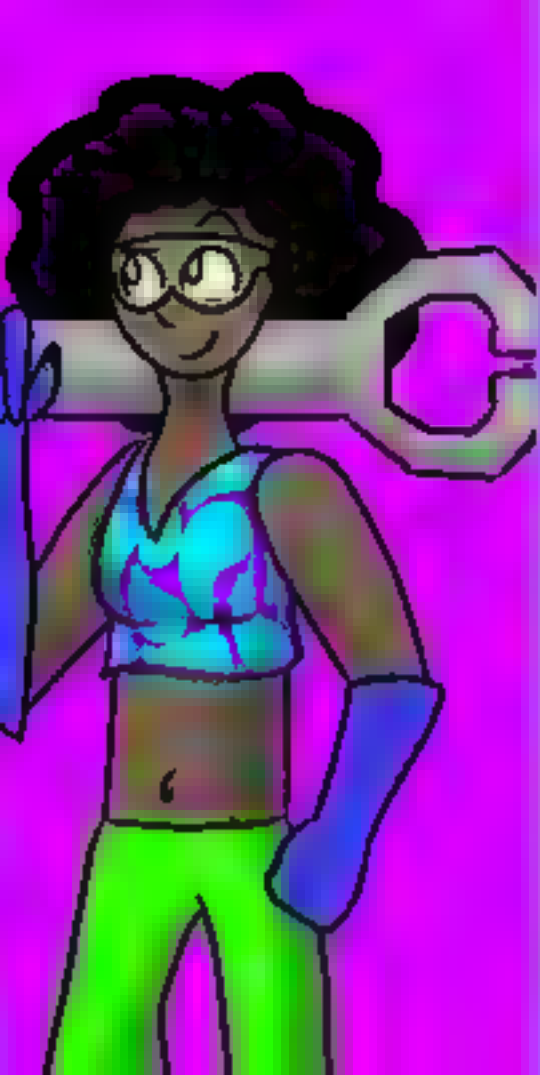
Calm
down,
Dr. Taintor.

I
can't
calm-

Sigh...have
a near-fatal
dose of
dopamine.

That's a
nuke!
An actual
nuke!

At times we
envy you
little
meat-things.





Behold! The limit of human power is to us no more than a bee sting!



Albeit a nasty one. We need to absorb more biomass to get back in trim.

About that...



HDDDDDD



Damn it, did we eat **all** of Pennsylvania?

I told you not to go back for seconds on Pittsburgh.



You need Any life is
fresh good. Willing
biomass. sapient life
is best.



We head for
Kansas. The
beings there
are well worth
assimilating.



Aren't they
waiting
for a
UFO?



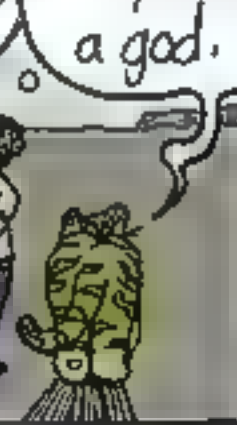
They're delusional.
Salvation won't
come from the skies,
but from **us**.



Reject their
delusions
and accept
your delusions,
huh?



It's not a
delusion
if we
really are
a god.





Tip's right. My whole life has been about getting human approval.

Weren't you made to, like, kill them?



Well, **Americans**. And even that was so the Captain would call me a good dog.



Maybe that's my problem with this UFO thing. Maybe I **need** humans.



You'll have me, and I'm like sixteen humans sewn together!

You always know the best slash worst thing to say.



Now A-Sig
owns all
the mad
tech.

All the
more reason
for me to
infiltrate.



To stop
reality
blindness?
You think
that'll help?



Deep down,
most humans
are basically
good.



After all
we've been
through, you
still believe
that?



Maybe,
maybe
not. But
you do.



Why do you have
to be right?



Psychologist!



Your old Maragda badge is compromised, but Chris's looks safe to reactivate.



You sure? Yes, but watch out for some kind of wacky mistaken identity sitch.



Like, if you seduced a guy who tracked down the **real** Chris to declare his love.



And the guy was Jason Momoa.



Just call ahead and let me know okay?

Are you planning to disguise yourself at all?

Of course!

See? I'm in disguise now!

Um, you're still in drag.

But it **clashes!**

Y'know, fine, I have no idea how your powers work.

Would Tip Wilkin wear white pumps?

Your flight to the East Coast, i.e. me, is departing.

Understood.

So this could be the last we see of you.

I'm hoping for the best. If not...

Good luck... Tip.

Same to you, Mr. Zerhaker.

What did I just call him?



I don't like Tip's chances out there.

Plus side, it's not like **here's** super safe.



That's not a plus!

Worry not, babe! We got a nonhuman army!



Those folks are just waiting to be turned into lean, seasoned prime brawn.



Do you want to train them or eat them?

Um. Train. Man, glad I wrote that down.



Somehow
we have
to outwit
A-Sig.

IF BAD
GUYS COME,
HITTY WILL
HIT THEM.

Heh, yeah.
Like
your
name.

HITTY
CONFUSED.
HITTY'S
NAME
SHORT FOR
MEHITABEL.

AH! WAIT!
NOW
HITTY
HEAR IT!

Gracious!
Now that I
muse upon
it, it's
striking!

Whoooa...
Okay, outwitting
is off the
table.



If A-Sig comes,
we need to make
this a hard target!
What've we got?



The
power
of
friendship!



The
power
of
Song!

Phrenology
!



I have a
great joke
about this
human here.

Maybe they'll
see us
and laugh
themselves
to death.



Exactly!
So...this
is a human
being...

Mad Garden AFTER L



GENETICALLY ALTERED
NEVER NATURAL

Don't write us off so quickly.

Your gang got your butts kicked in Colma.



Yes! We're an angry zombie horde!

I guess we **do** have resources to tap.



Unity! Call up the zombies, the Sasquatches, and the Killbots!



Now get on social media and recruit some fighters!

C'mon, rampage...



Don't rely on force alone. Remember we have a powerful brain trust.



Virginia, about your solar cell analysis... Stop predicting everything I say! **You** stop predicting everything I say!



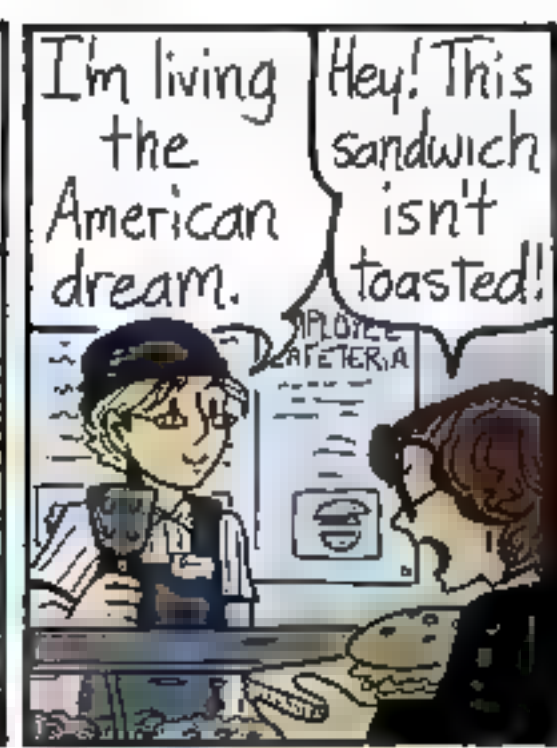
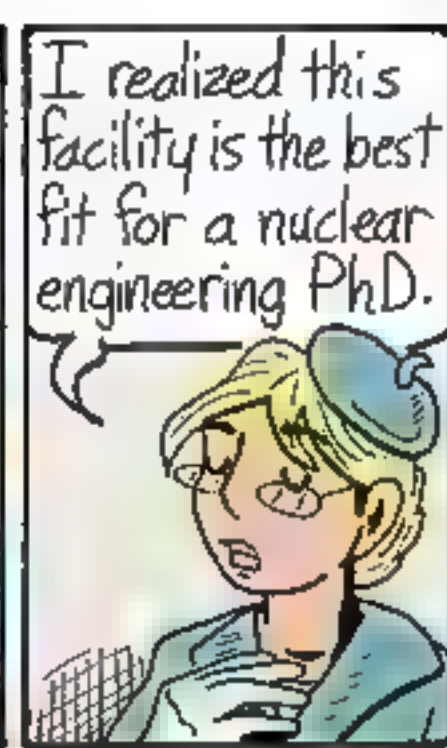
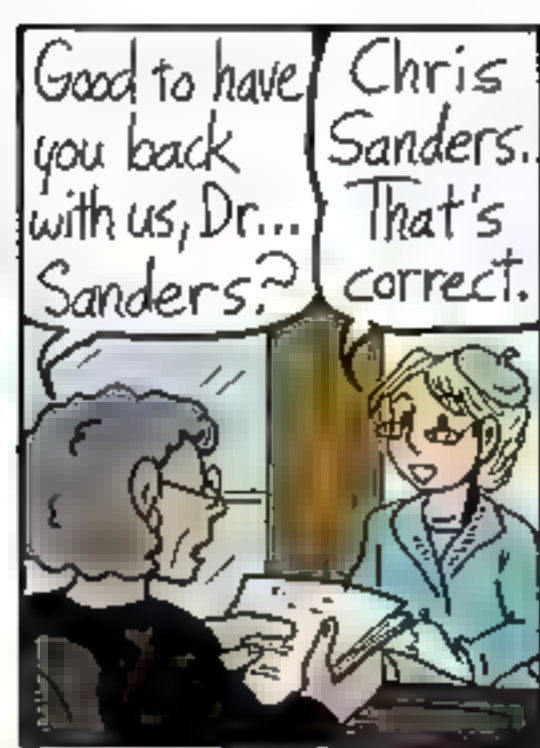
HAHA HAHA HA

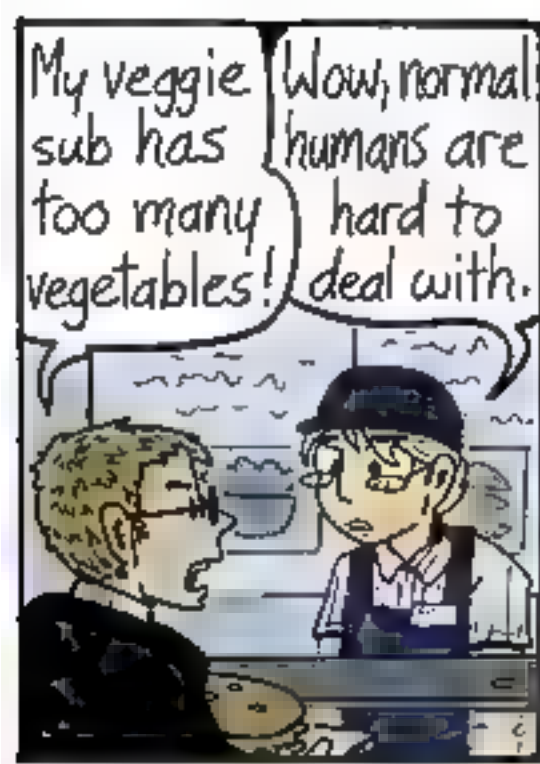


I'd rather forget, thanks.

Next **I** predict makeouts.







Precambrian Defense!
We've got a loose
dinosaur here!
Where'd
it come
from?



Time
portal. I didn't
think you
time bureau
guys had portal
technology.



We don't.
But we
will.



But how
is it here
now?



**Time.
Portal.**

Sorry I'm slow.
I got head-
butted by a
skull with studs.



The pachycephalosaur
is in the cafeteria!

Dinosaurs are
basically birds, right?



More or less.
Your helmet
may be
agitating it.
See?



How do you know
so much about
birds?

I dated
one!



One
approach
we haven't
tried.

And I
know not to
underestimate
a hat.





Karen Wojtyla at McElderry Books has bought world rights to *Steam* by *The Dire Days of Willowweep Manor* author **Shaenon K. Garrity** (1), illustrated by Emily Holden. The YA graphic novel follows the adventures of Ruby, a "hypercognitive humanoid" designed to solve science's greatest problems, who escapes from a university lab and finds a job as a barista in a kooky coffee shop where she finds plenty of problems to solve. Publication is slated for fall 2023. Molly Ker Hawn at the Bent Agency represented the author, and Britt Sless at Britt Sless Creative Management represented the illustrator.

It's not aggressive after all!

Nope, just confused and scared.



And hungry, which is easily solved.



And that calmed it down?

Right. So what have we learned?



A way to keep it in targeting position!

And here's me with **zero** puppets.



Don't shoot the dinosaur!

The hot cafeteria man is right!



Those rounds cost \$200 per. You can burn a quarter mil with a minute of fire.



You saved us several grand and paperwork. We're grateful.

How grateful?



Isn't this cutting into the savings?

We've still got 16 bullets' worth of champagne allowance.



Clearly you understand the bottom line, Mr...



You're wasted Sanders. in food service. Come work for us.



The Bureau of Precambrian Defense?



It's a step up in clearance, to start.

Brr. Someone, somewhere, is succeeding through silly means.



Is it me? I sewed on extra typing fingers.

I'm in.
The line looks secure.
Report.



This morning I started work at the employee cafeteria...



...and now I'm a time bureau liaison and I have a pet dinosaur!



Yeah, well, I got my pencils sorted by height.



I named him "Panini."

How are things in Kansas?

Fine! Great! Pulling our team together!



I'm doing easily as well as you! Got a well-oiled force here!



You! New recruit! Step up and explain why you belong in this dog's army!



I'm a pig who once ran "Noises Off" for the dinner theater circuit.

Congrats, you're a general now.



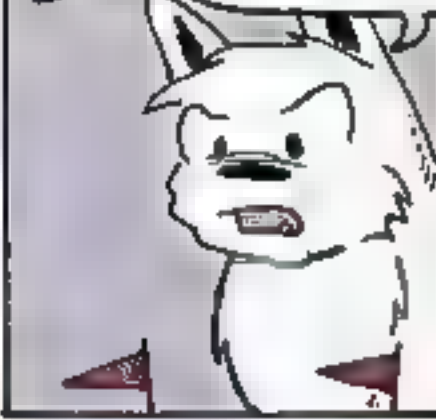
The Biomass took a hit, but now it's heading our way.

To eat us or recruit us?



Six of one, ma'am.

H.T. and A-Sig... two threats at once.

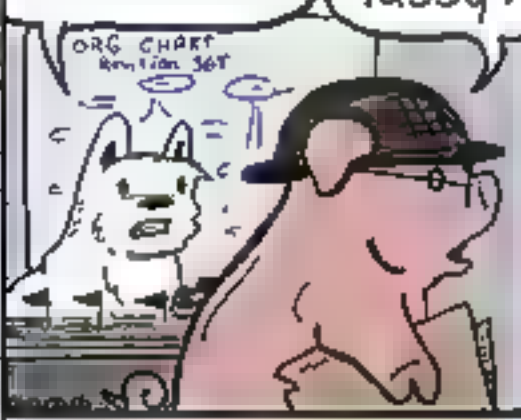


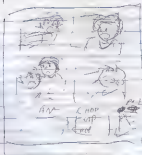
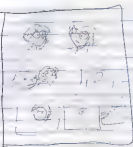
...which are hostile to each other. We play this right, we come out smelling like a rose.



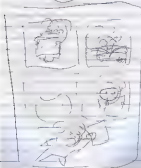
I take it you've never been close to the Biomass.

Meh, I'm a pig. I'm not fussy.





(one side of)
 whole part to a
 spite true & is getting
 around!



The St. Charlans
are outfitting their
flying
ship with
weapons.

Yes, that
sounds safe.

We need
air
support.

Fine. I'm
out of
sensible
solutions.



Good thing
there's
always the
other kind.

Oops,
crushed
a churro
stand.

Whoa, Kay,
who's your
friend?

Friend **and**
draconic
life partner!



I thought
there was
only one
of...you.

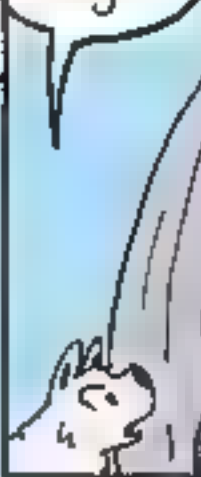
Meet the
Great
Dragon
Spear of
Renown—



—First of His Name,
Eater of Time and
Sentinel at the Gates
of Morning, pronouns
he/him.



I'll
call you
"Roger."



Sure, he's
pretty
easygoing.



Our online recruitment initiative is paying off!



By exploiting social media algorithms, I radically increased engagement in our cause.



Which means...?

Whoa! It's CrankyDoge in the flesh!



I love the gifts where she's yelling at stuff!



I made you into roughly 400 memes.



The loss of my dignity is a small price.





I'm told there's tension between our bureau and the Bureau of Temporal Anomalies.

You stole our time portal!

Well, **you** stole it **next!**

There's a lot of overlap in our duties. Why not merge bureaus?

It'd save hassle and limit paradoxes!

I wonder why no one suggested it before.

And we won't need a liaison. You're fired.

Ah. Better yet, go back and un-hire him.



I reorganized myself
out of a job.

I put in a good
word for you.



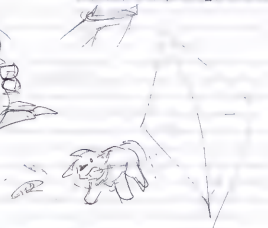
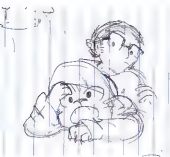
You'll be hearing
from another
department via
the usual channels.



Is email
passé
now,
or...?

It's polite
to tip. Do
you have any
cow eyeballs?





Um, before your scroll erupted into flames, it told me to come here—

**ENTER,
POSTULANT!**



I am Master Barrier of Cryptid Studies. Scientist, ninja, literal wizard. I hear you are good with animals.



Is this a "Care of Magical Creatures" job, or—



Nothing so mundane, prospective acolyte!

There's a big spider in the executive washroom. Can you catch it?

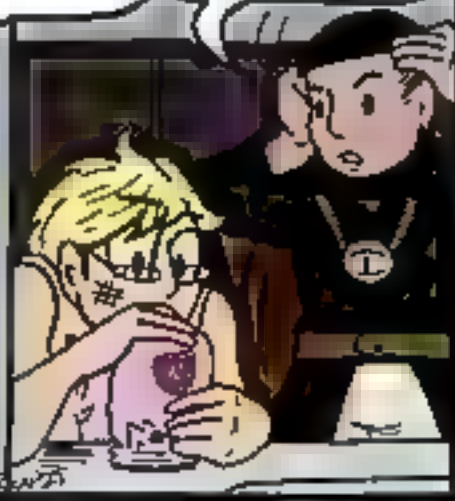
A job I was born for.





The threat
is
contained.

Well done,
clever
servant.



I hereby
appoint you
my wizard
apprentice.

Great.
What
are the
perks?



Access
to the
executive
washroom!



The one
with the
spiders?

You see
why you're
perfect
for this
position.



I guess magic
broomsticks
were too much
to hope for.



It's a lot like my early days at Skin Horse, descending through the pasements...

Uh-huh.



Now I'm moving **up** through a **human** organization, but the people are just as weird.



If we're all a little bit crazy, maybe there's hope for peace after all.



Gonna have to get back to you on that "hope" thing.



Sorry, I'm sure you've got paperwork.



Stay calm!
I'm here
off the
record!

You **secretly**
broke into
my office.
That's so
much better.



I need
to find
a rat
with a
sword.

Valiant?
Artie knows
him, but
I haven't
seen him.



Mind
if I
look
for
him?

Let an enemy
goon tour our
operation on
the eve of
battle? Why,
sure.



Thanks!
You're not
as uptight
as Artie
said!

They beat the
sarcasm
out of you
at A-Sig,
huh?



I just don't want
Valiant to get
hurt. So you barge
in on **me**?!



It'll
be so
awkward
if I
kill him.

Out of my
office! I'm
not listening
to you!



That's right.
Listen to
me instead.



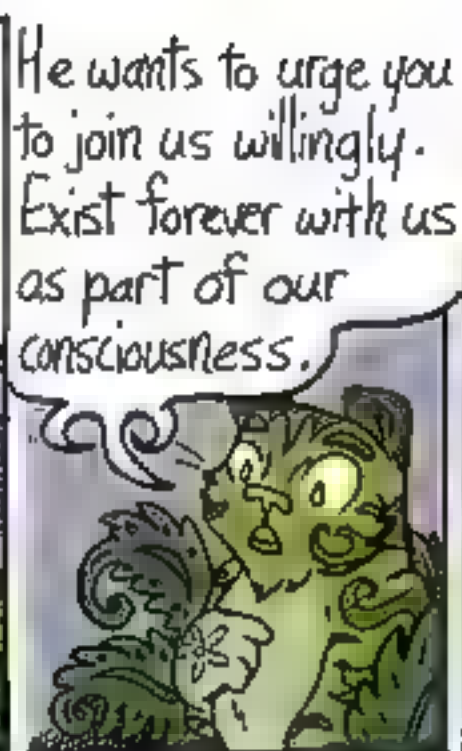
That's it.
I'm getting
a secretary
for the
door.

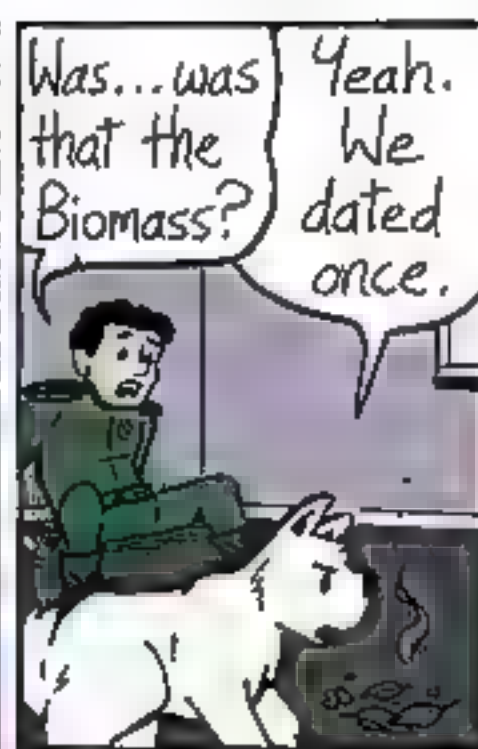


I'd have
called
ahead if
I could.









Fellow nonhumans! The human army approaches! You must join us or perish under their boots!

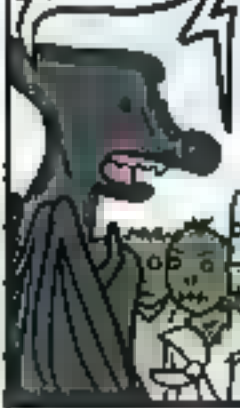


Fallacy!

This tiger's presented us with a false dichotomy!



If Zombie Ben Franklin is against it...



He's a Founding Father!

Good call, Zombie Ben Franklin!



...Fine. I'll take the win.



Thanks, Dan.



Stacy

Those who would join us, choose now.



When next we meet, the rest will perish!



Er, hi. Rep for the Biomass here. Sign up to merge with His glory.



Include contact info.

Kinda ruined the big exit.

Sorry **someone** has to follow up on the paperwork!



Go on and torture me! I'll never talk!

We won't torture you.



We don't even have a brig, so all I can do is put you where you can do the least harm.



Hey nerds. Got a new guy for your "Babylon 5" watch party.



I'll tell all!

Shh! Vir is speaking!



Watch it! I'm
Anasigma
elite ops!

Echo
Bravo,
right?



You've
met
him?

We both have.
But I met
him about
300 times.



He killed us
a lot. It's
hard to forget.



Well! No
antique
cheesy corn
for **you**!

Speaking
of things
that can
kill us...



Look!

A cartoon illustration of a woman with short dark hair and glasses, looking surprised or excited with her mouth open. She is holding a book in her hands. The text "book" and "15." is visible in the background.

A black and white line drawing of a young girl with short, wavy hair and large, round glasses. She has a wide-eyed, open-mouthed expression of surprise or shock. Her hands are clenched into fists at waist level. The drawing is simple, with bold outlines and some cross-hatching for shading on her hair and clothing.

LAWFUL
GOOD

to locate their future
customers. These companies, he
warned,
should know how they
can help a
customer's ideas.

[illegible]

Dr. Norman MacKenzie's "Power Consciousness" (Harcourt Brace)
Positive Consciousness, Empowering and Inspiring 1979
 312 pp. \$12.95

Powerless Beliefs "Are you looking at the world around you through the window of 'powerlessness'?" That may sometimes be true to the extent that you are not seeing things as they are. They are what they are, but you are not seeing them as a scientist that would find out what they are. It is not power up, it is power down. Powerless beliefs do not need to be continually reinforced. You often find them in the form of mantras such as "I will find things that I am good for," a helpful technique to reveal ideas which a rationalized mind might struggle to see clearly. The positive thinking that has been so popular in the last few years is not so much about increasing a person's self-confidence as it is, quite, to let the mind be itself, that is, a mind without a power.

Just by connecting
with people, I'm
moving quietly
up the ranks.



It's simple.
Being a people
person is a spy's
greatest strength.



Hi, Tip! Wendy from
Jetpack Suppression,
remember?



And his
greatest
weakness. We dated a
couple times?
Then a few
times more? Then
once on New Year's...



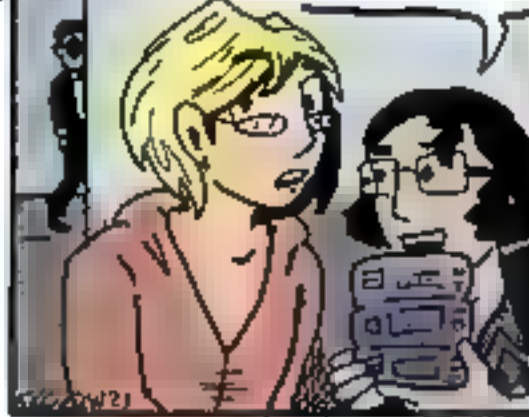
Wendy, I get it,
I—"Dr. Sanders."
You're
undercover.



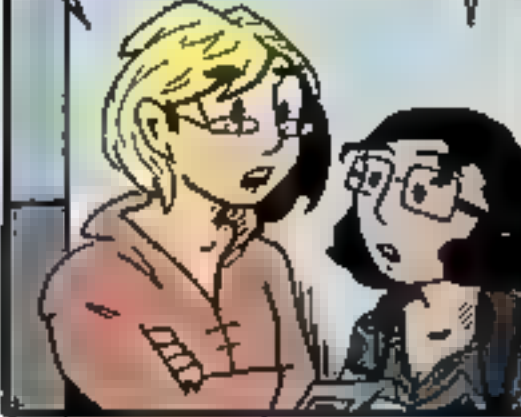
Don't worry. The
Department of
Jetpack Suppression
is in the resistance.

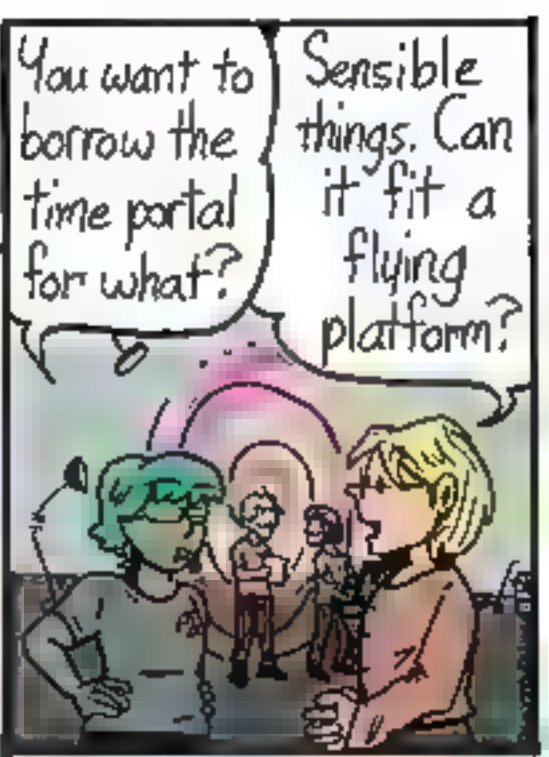
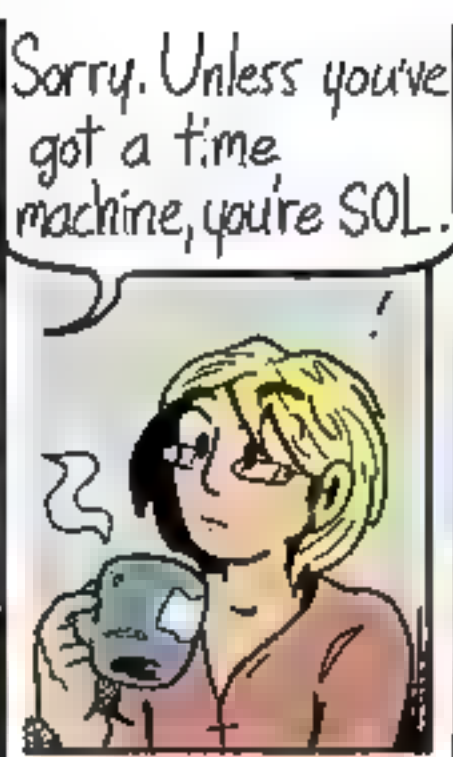


Oh? At this very
moment, I'm stealing
printer ink from
the supply room!



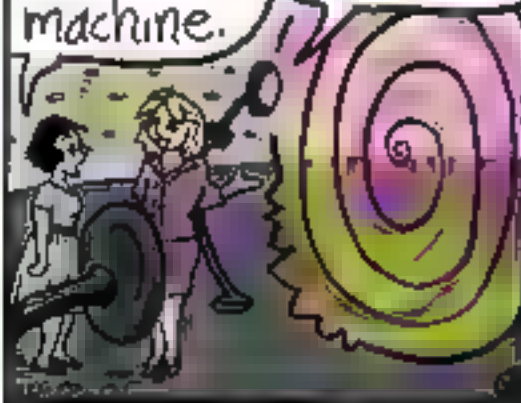
Are you rebels,
or just bad
employees?
There's
a
difference?





I didn't expect you to find an actual time machine.

But I did! I can train in the past!



You'd need a qualified instructor.

You can do it, can't you?



Well...there **should** be a responsible person on hand to protect causality.



HAHAHA!

Smoke that pterosaur!

We've crushed an entire **flock** of butterflies.



So this is
our office
in the
Cretaceous.

It's
certainly a
change in
perspective.

We could
stay here...
in a simpler
time...

No.
We have
a war
to fight.

Sigh... you're
right.

But first can we
make out in a
dinosaur
nest?

Oh,
absolutely.

With your certification in order, I'm happy to hire you to the Department of Jetpack Suppression.



And now I'm firing you so you can move along to your next promotion.



That was...

You'll be fine. You recover quickly.



Say, if you invite me over tonight, we no longer have to report it to HR.



Told you.

Again, it's the

SKIN HORSE MAILBAG

Jeff Edition!

Heyo.

LAWFUL GOOD

Jeff Wikstrom writes: "The strip for 8/31/2021 felt like a real sharp turn, narratively speaking. I'd love to hear y'all unpack it a little."



Damn it, did we eat **all** of Pennsylvania? I told you not to go back for seconds on Pittsburgh.



So. We may have indulged in hyperbole. I doubt the Biomass has eaten all of Pennsylvania.

LAWFUL GOOD

But, yes, this is a pretty drastic thing to do to a story universe.

LAWFUL GOOD

I've always been fascinated by the idea that the world is exponentially weirder than most of us believe, and we don't perceive it.

LAWFUL GOOD

That was the subject of some of my earliest fiction, and it was one of the things that attracted me to Shaeron's webcomic *Narbonic*.

LAWFUL GOOD

Yeah!

On a symbolic level, it's true. Wonderful things do exist, all around us, and we can become too short-sighted to see them.

LAWFUL GOOD

I always wanted *Skin Horse* to feel like a gradual slide into weirdness, where things would get harder and harder to fit with our world.

LAWFUL GOOD

I'm not sure we did the "gradual" part well, but entire states getting steamrolled was always in the plan.

LAWFUL GOOD

We're glossing over a lot of implied tragedy, but isn't that how we've always done things? There's a core of cruelty in the *Narbonic* universe.

LAWFUL GOOD

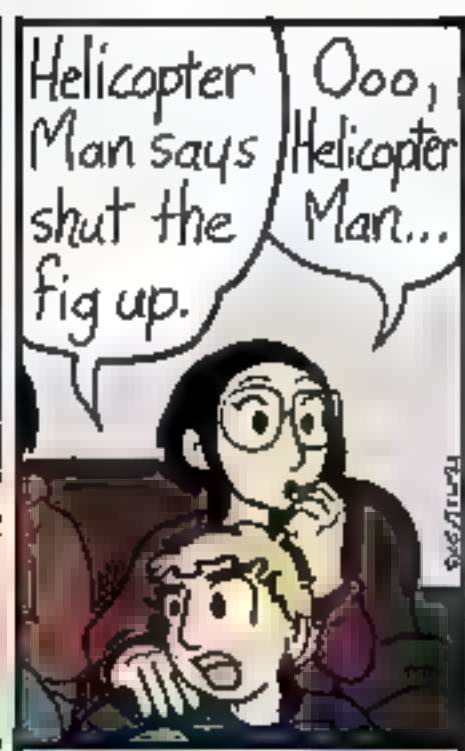
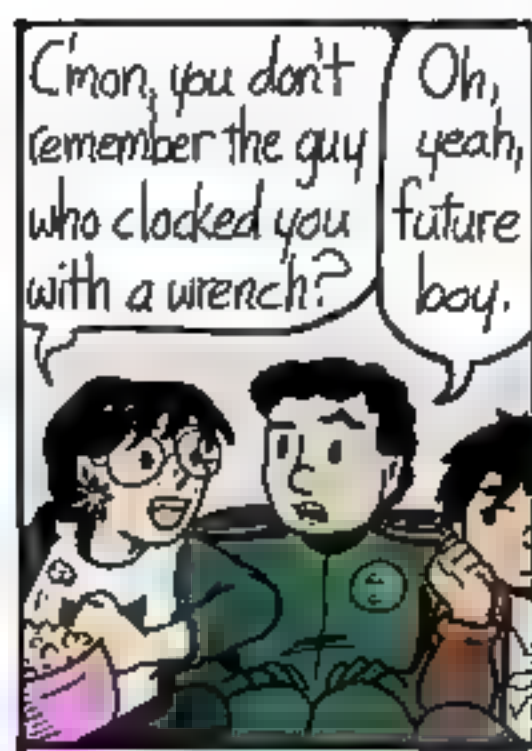
Hey!

Ultimately, I just wanted someone to eat Pennsylvania. Maybe it doesn't have to be any more complicated than that.

LAWFUL GOOD

I would've eaten Ohio.





Shouldn't you guys be preparing for battle?

This is the calm before the storm.

Defenses are up, and right now the future's too chaotic for me to see.

If this is our last night, there's nothing we'd rather do than spend it with friends.

I can think of a thing.

We'll clear out after the Year of the Shadow War.



I see what's going on. You're trying to get in my head.

Not much room there.

You want me to like you. It won't work.

Cool. Scootch over so I can sit with Nera.

Give up. I don't like ~~any~~ of you freaks.

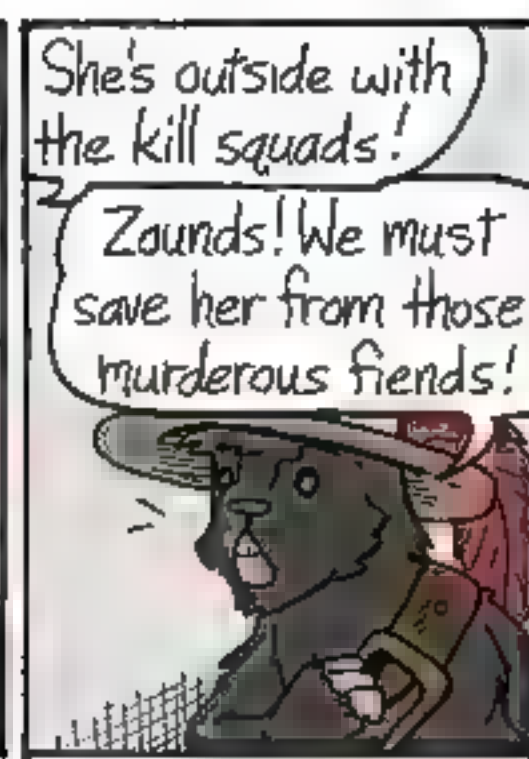
What ho! I heard tell of a party and brought Fiddle Fiddle!

poing

... valiant ...

The other rats got to it, so it's mostly fiddle.





I... we need to talk. Away from the geeks.

Wait!

I broke free of Anasigma. I know what it's like.

If you need help, or just a sounding board, I'm here any time.

Yeah?

Well, not **any** time. But I can pencil you in after TV and sex.

I'll stick with Valiant.

He's leaving with the rat. You sure about this?

Trust me.

It's like the saying goes. If we let him go and he comes back, he's ours.

And if he doesn't?

I'm thinking onion gravy.

I'll allow it, but only 'cause I'm a sucker for onion gravy.

Either way, we're good.



Skin Horse
2022 Calendar

Out of idle curiosity, where are we going?

I'm getting you to safety!

And then what will **you** do?

Dunno. Go back to camp?

So tomorrow you can kill my friends and kin?

Um. Hm. Yes?

It **is** a relationship red flag.

If you tell me which ones you like, I'll try to aim around them.

Psst!
Alfa
Al-



Argh!



You
startled
me!

Sorry...
my bad...



This is
what safety
looks like,
is it?

...don't
shoot...
rat
friend...



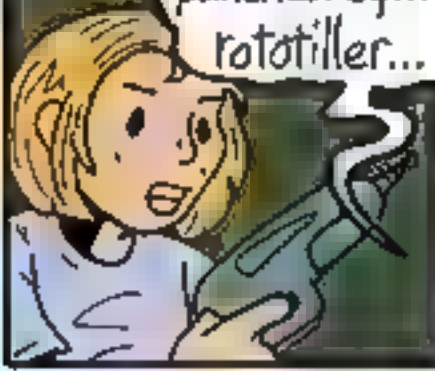
Don't worry, Echo!
I'm sabotaging our
mission
from within!

shot...
inna
face...



I've been secretly
taking our weapons
off "lethal" mode.

feels like...
punched by...
rototiller...



I set them to
"unfathomably
painful" instead!



That's
stealth.

...always
were the
brains of the
team...



Thanks for the rescue, but it would be ignoble to flee.

He's got a point, Echo.



So, what, you wanna switch sides?

Yes! Let's do it!



Fine! I'm in! We're a **TOP SECRET REBEL FORCE!**



Maybe don't bellow the secret stuff at moose volume.

We're right here trying to sleep.



Well, well. Echo Bravo.
They said you were the
best, but
that was
long ago

They
said that?



Turning you
in will get
me back in
Central's
good graces.

What'd
they
say I
was the
best at?



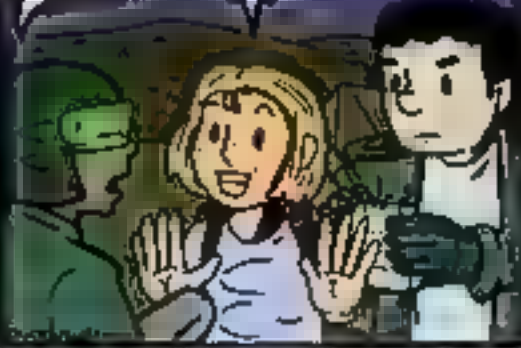
Echo ... I'm gonna
need to update
my resumé, and
I could use a
quote.



They said
you were
best at
being
shot.

Can
confirm
!

Ordnance
reception
specialist.
Gotcha.



Why do
you need
to impress
Central?

We all do.
Everyone here
is close to
extirpation.

C'mon! Why would
Anasigma send its
least trusted troops
into battle...

... on the front
lines.. pinned between
two untested
enemy forces...

Never
mind,
I get
it now.

Survivors get up
to ten Loyalty
Bucks for the
commissary.





What's wrong, milady?

We're cannon fodder!

I don't know what Anasigma's set us up for, and that scares me.



Now I know and it has **not** reduced the scariness.

Not his boots! They're **perfect!**



Central's in
your hands.
I'm off to
tie up a
loose end.

Want to
check the
messages
from Kansas
first?



Give
me
the
gist.

Aah, aah,
we're being
torn apart,
aaaah.



Then on the back
I wrote a lot of
As and Es and a
"grk" at the end.



Sounds like
it'll sort
itself out
soon.

I used
red ink
for
effect.



I'm too moderately attractive to die!

Don't panic! We were briefed on this!



If I remember, we're supposed to retreat into the wheat fields...

Into this wheat field!



YAAH

MONCH
MONCH
MONCH

deeee

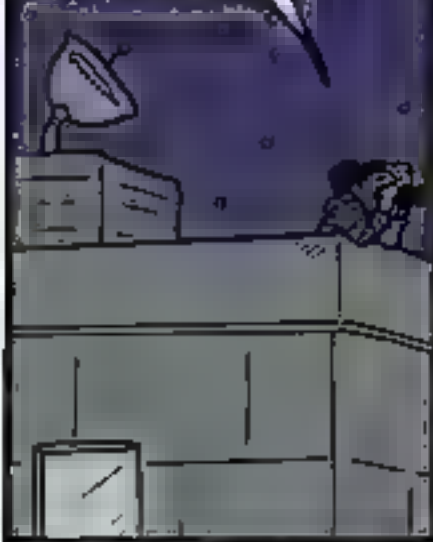


Course, we were briefed by people who want us dead.

I'm a six or low seven! At least!



Babe!
Come see!



I was right!
Echo Bravo's
coming back!
Friendship wins!



He's running
from a pack
of veggie
tigers.

A
technical
win for
friendship!



Psst!
In here!

Where
are
we?

Former A-Sig
airbase, now
part of the
resistance.

An old Anasigma
facility!

We're safe!

Wow, you
must be
fleeing
something
really bad.

You kept
the employee
needle pit
sharpened!

I fear
we've led
the Biomass
to you.

This is where
Anasigma
architecture
is a plus.



**CRASH
RAWR**



Well, sheesh.
Who **walks**
down a
hallway?

That's just
asking
to get
acetylened.





The A-Sig
troops have
engaged
the Biomass.

I guess it's
too much to
hope they'll
wipe each
other out.



At least
it buys
us some
time.

Tell everyone
to take
shelter. We
don't want to
fight yet.



To be honest, I'm
still not sure what
winning looks
like.



Easy. It's
the one
where we
don't die.

Thanks. Do I
have, like, a
Joint Chiefs
of Staff you
can call in?



Er...you
wanted
to see
me?

Yes, Dr.
Sanders.
Be at
ease.

HUMAN
RESOURCES
I BRYANT

It's hard
when you're
facing away
from me, sir.

Fool! The
alternative
would be so
much worse!

To look upon the
face of Shadow
Government HR
would **end** you!

Is that why
I never
got an
orientation?

Take some
complimentary
UV goggles!

Is this about my rise through the ranks, Mr Bryant? It's all legit.

I know.



I'm just in a bit of a time crunch...

Fear not. HR is here to help.



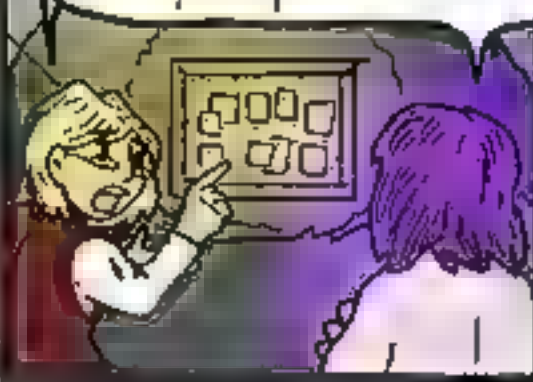
BEHOLD!

No! I thought it was a myth!



Is that ..the in-house job opportunities board?

I am required to post them, and post I have.



"Doomsday Seed Vault
Clone Wrangler"? "Hoffa
Containment
Facility"?
Analyst"? "Lo, I
grant you
clearance."



I had no idea
these jobs
existed.

Such is the
paradox
of shadow
government
hiring.



The work is open
to all, but can be
seen only by those
already inside.



"FIRST LADIES' BALL
GOWN TESTING CORPS"?
THIS WAS HERE ALL
ALONG?!



Welcome to
the next
level.



With this info,
I can get you
promoted to
the top
tomorrow.

Great!
I'll be
back in
no time!

By then I'll be
eaten by vegetable
tigers or raptured
by alien
bees.

Don't be
silly!

Tip, I just said
"vegetable tigers"
and "alien bees"
in the same
sentence.

And?

Sensible
was
never an
option.

Okay, be
proportionally
silly.



Here we are on
the cusp of war.
The air is thick
with tension.



AAH THREE CATS IN
A BAG WHY DID I
PUT THREE CATS
IN A BAG



AND WHY DID I
GIVE THEM
AIRHOOORNS



I'm trying to have
a historic moment!





I don't want to know where all this came from, do I?

Relax. It's a royal gift.

Queen Elena wishes to support your undead troops.



Where'd **she** get it, though?

That you don't want to know.



Babe! I found three Popeye arms and a spleen!

Agreed. I'll get the hand sanitizer.



Gross,
but good
for the
war effort.

Speaking of
that, I need
to see the
Cypress.



The
jungle
trying
to eat
us?

No, the
original
Mother
Cypress.
Her core.



Oh, that. I think
we gave it to the
airbase folks.



Have you
lost track
of your own
shadow plots?

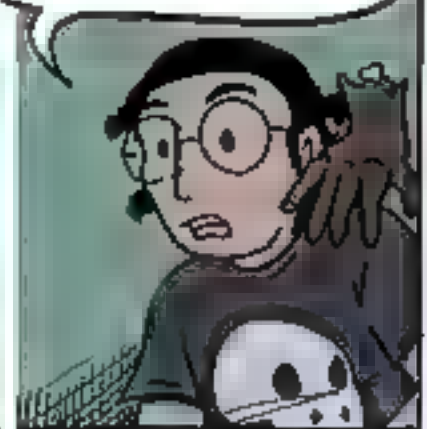
The
Resistance
ran out of
Post-Its.



The Biomass out there
has been corrupted,
but it budded from
the Cypress.



If we revive her,
maybe she can
re-absorb the
hostile mass.



That's
actually
a
sensible
plan.



Thanks!
I got it
from the
ghost of
her ex!

I'm gonna
pretend
you said
"logic,"
so okay!



Guy shows
up a couple
times a year
to watch
the Saints.

Sorry for
being a
jerk in
the past.

Aw, well...
thanks for
never biting
me.

I was
jealous
of you
and Unity.

Friendship
isn't a
limited
resource.

I get that now.
It's the most
important lesson
I've learned.

And maybe
the last,
depending
on how the
weekend goes.

Well, you
squeezed
in under
the wire.



Holiday Strip Sale



Is there
a safe
route to the
airbase?

According
to Unity's
cat
sentries.



Good thing I'm here
to double-check.
There are things
only a trained dog
can do-



YAUGH!

Frog! Get it
off me!



Is that
one of
them?

You cats
could've
warned me!



We're here for the core of the Cypress. It's a big seed thing?

An, the Green Mother.



We Sasquatch have a sacred bond with nature. We've revived her using our ancient techniques.



Behold: the Jam Jar and Toothpicks!

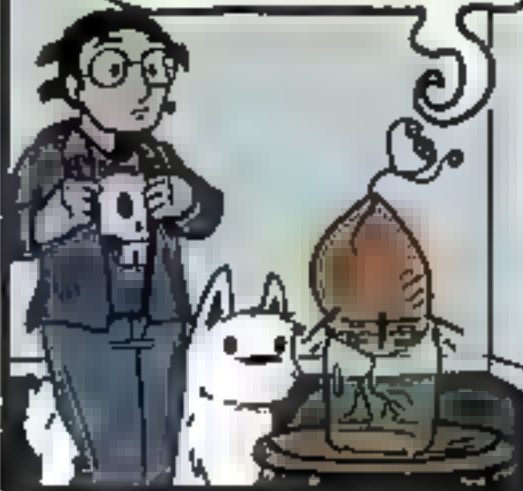


So glad we've got you guys on board.

I've had worse lodgings.



Remy, chère!
Don't look at me!
I'm not decent!



I bring news!

No!
I bring hope!

Mais non!

Mais non!



I bring
girl.



I do believe
I have some
pralines in
the cupboard.

I'll
get a
plate.







Good morning, Bureau
of Chemtrail Proliferation!
I'm your new ops
director.

Hello!

I'd like to open
by laying out my
goals for this
critical shadow
department.

Goal #1: Leave
for a position
with higher
clearance.

Er,
if
I
may—

No time! I've
got sixteen
more careers
before lunch!

Goodbye!

PANEL THREE

COMIC BOOK SCRIPTS BY TOP WRITERS

R. Alan Brooks

The Burning Metronome

Lowell Cunningham

Jack Ooze

Shaenon Garrity

The Dire Days of
Willowweep Manor

Kim Hyun Sook

& Ryan Estrada

Banned Book Club

Barbara Randall Kesel

Eccentric Orbit

Eric Shanower

Age of Bronze

Bryan Talbot

Cherubs!

Mark Verheiden

The American

Mark Waid

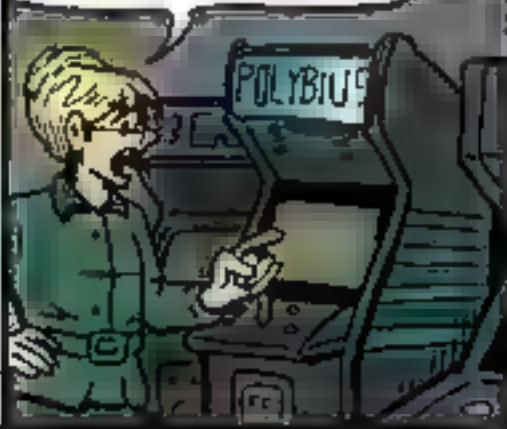
Potter's Field

edited by
Scott McCloud

We **must** keep the secret film studio on the Moon a **secret!**



Yes, get the brain-scrambling tech into home consoles! My promotion is on the line!



It's been a lovely half-hour with all of you. Remember: fluoride, fluoride, fluoride!



Help. I'm too important.



If I had thumbs I'd play the tiniest violin.

It's lonely
in the upper
echelons. I'm
surrounded
by yes-men.

You want
someone
to take
you down
a peg?



Hmm...
that
might
help.

I was
kidding.
Now get
back to-

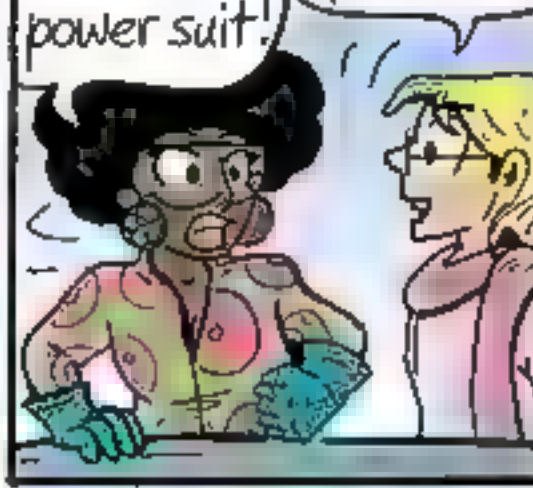


...Tip?
Tip?



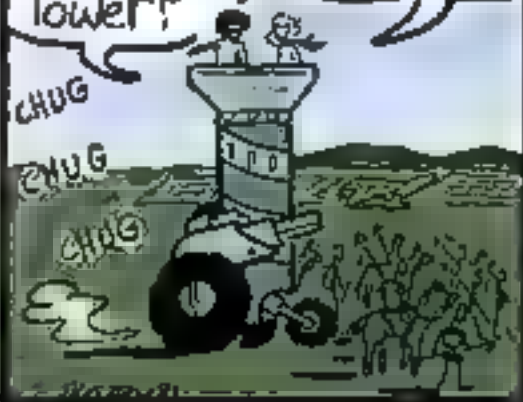
Yikes!
Ham gravy
in a
power suit!

Yes! More
of that,
please!



How'd you find my fly mobile espionage tower?

Some underlings gave me an address.



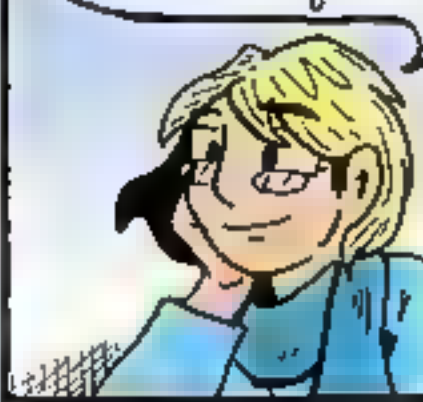
You in with the serious Gs, fridge butter?

Maybe they traced your CB band. Why an espionage tower?



For doing espionage.

And maybe a **little** conquest?



About 50/50. Your intel's tight.

Well, it's got cannons.



I gave
you a
choice once.
Recall it?

We were
handcuffed
together. I
could've gone
off with you.



Instead, you turned
me over to the pigs.
Our vibes have been
out of tune since.



We won't get aligned
till you ditch your
square ways and
join my
criminal -



Okay.

Dag, that
turned
around
quick.



I have
the perfect
crime boots!

You're jiving
me. You're
straight
tripping.

I want to
be with you,
Tigerlily
Jones.

I'm going to become
the top bureaucrat
in the country, the
embodiment of the
Man...

... and then I'm
going to give it all
up and surrender
to you.

You're
trying to
seduce
me.

If you like,
we can use
the handcuffs
again.

I can't even find you on the org chart anymore.

I'm so high up I'm dizzy, Sweetheart.



Might as well toss it, huh?

Sure. I won't need it from here.



Once this is over, I'll join Tigerlily Jones and appoint you my successor.



Where's that chart? I need to find myself on it!

You may have to hunt me down and bring me to justice.





Tip,
what
are you
saying?

I plan to leave
the shadow
government
to you.



That's ridiculous.

It's perfect!
You can finally
conquer America!



Who's more prepared
to run sinister
secret operations?



We can't argue now. You
have a 20-minute window
to chair the Weaponized
Shark Committee.



See?

Tip wants me to take over his position when he leaves!

Tip's leaving?

He's going off to a life of sexy crime with Tigerlily.

Aw, lucky444.

I know! I'll be telling the President, "Not today, gotta choose envelope widths!"

Wait, which of us is lucky?

Um. Def you and your envelopes.

Aren't you happy
about my
bloodless
coup?

Dunno.
Are you?



It's what
the Captain
always
wanted!

Is it
what
you
want?

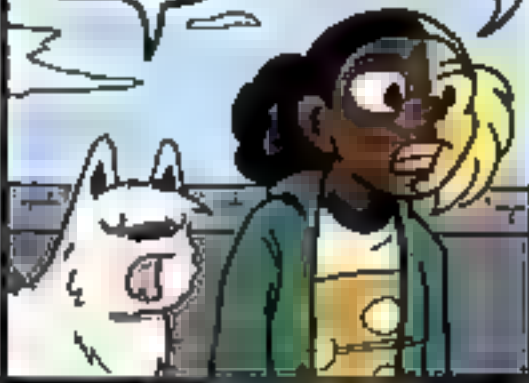


Or is it that thing
where you pretend
you're happy and
get crabbier and
crabbier?



To prove you
wrong, I'll
be **extra**
pleasant.

Oh no,
~~that~~ thing.
That's
even worse.



I was hoping we'd ride the flying saucer. I'll have responsibilities!



But aliens!

Unity—

Or, here's an idea.



Get engaged and after a second of wedding planning you'll wanna torch the entire universe.



Not gonna lie, that sounds good too.

Flights are leaving on the hour to F.U. City.



Nick! I
didn't know
you were,
um, here.

Part
of me's
always
here.

The rest of me is
downstairs trying
to make catering
happen.

I gotta pull a buffet
together in an
apocalypse warzone,
plus a buncha guests
are zombies.

...yeah, okay,
that part
takes care of
itself.

You two
gotta
work
this out.

We don't need
relationship
advice, Nick.



Once we iron out
a few small problems,
we'll have a long,
happy life
together.



smaller
than
that,
please.

Here's
my idea
of a happy
life.





Lemme
at
'im!

Down, Unity!
We need support!
Can anyone—



...hear
me?

service!



I think that
means, "Give the
big salad a
broadside."



Possible.
Very
possible.

Way
to go,
flying
nerds!



Finally,
they're
blowing up
the right
thing.

Affairs are escalating
to a proper
Donnybrook!

HITTY
KNOW.



NOW IS TIME TO
REVEAL HITTY'S
GREAT + TERRIBLE
PURPOSE.



Not to quibble, but
you've done that
all along.

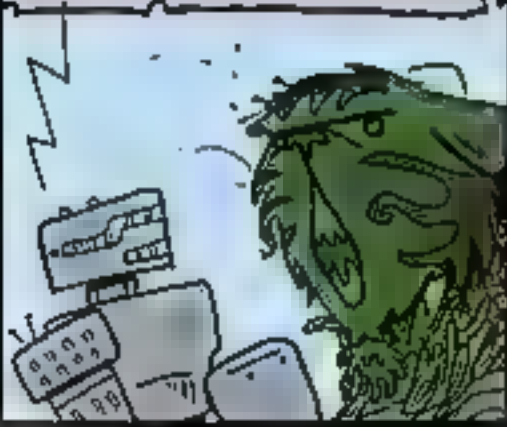
PRACTICE
MAKE
PERFECT.



HEY!
PLANT BULLY!

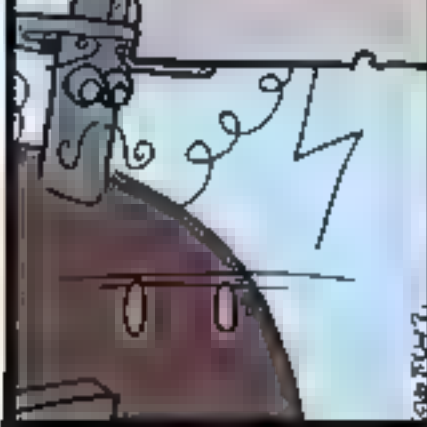


WHY YOU NOT
PICK ON SOMEONE
ALSO SMALLER THAN
YOU BUT MUCH
BETTER AT HITTING?

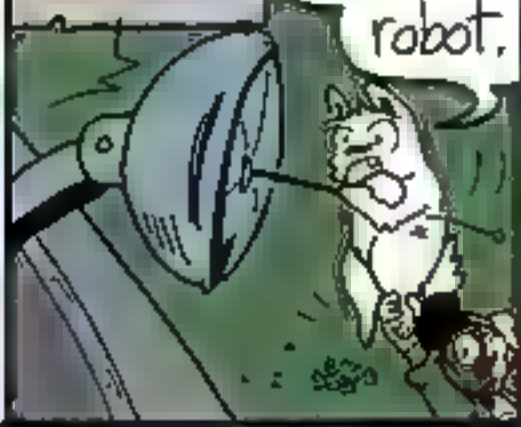


Hitty,
flower

IN CASE
REFERENT
UNCLEAR,
PICK ON
HITTY!



STAND IN
PATH OF
HITTING
ARM!



Now, **now**
I question
living in
a battle
robot.

Hey, you two!
Get on board!



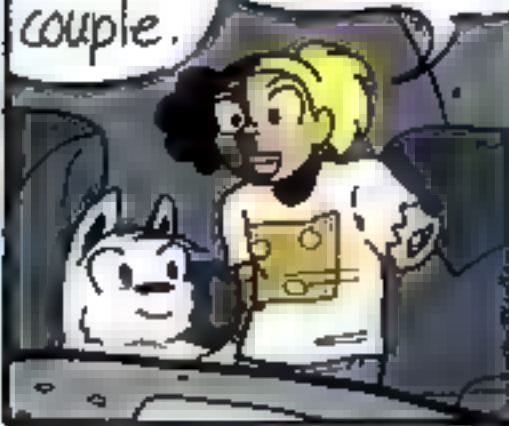
Yaugh!
Babe!

On it!



You two
are the
weirdest
power
couple.

Thanks, babe!
You can
pick my
next arm!



Suppressing fire,
dragons! Everyone
else to the airbase!



Retreat?
We have
the upper
paw!

Our only
advantage is
knowing where
the enemy is,
and—



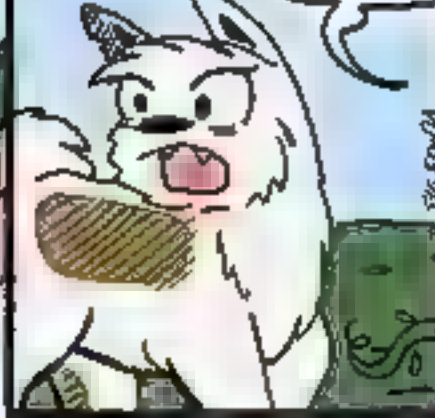
YOINK

Argh!



You heard
the pig!
Retreat!

Not this
way!
The other
way!



Shit's outta
control.
Can't
concentrate...

Breathe.
Lie down
if it helps
you focus.



Thanks.
You can
interview
our
officiant.

Wait. You
were still
working
on the
wedding?



Hi!
I'm
Gary!

We're in
the midst
of battle!



Funny story,
a plant
thing ate
the rabbi.

Even your
multitasking
has limits,
Nick!

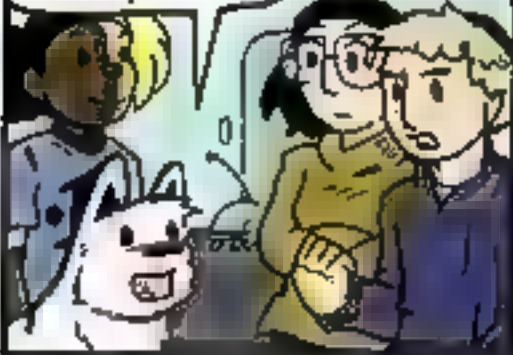






By infecting ourselves with Unity, we can work in synch!

Become a hivemind to fight a hivemind?



Just enough to communicate.

It's not a bad idea. Let's see how it works.



Okay! Who's next?

I rescind my professional endorsement.



Don't tell me we broke the dog.

Sweetheart? How do you feel?

Ice cream is great! I love biting guys!

Poing

Success!

You sure? She always likes ice cream and biting guys.

But usually it takes her like six hours to admit it.

Find me some kind of cool hat!

HA HA oh yeah
look at this baby
service?



copacetic
but this
jive pays
your
orchestra
cut rate



Sweetdaddy's
right! I
can't infect
our robot
friends!



Actually, you **can**.
You're ranite-
based. You can
upload Unity?



I could
put her
in the
cloud!



I need to
stop helping
with ideas.



You wanna insert nanotech into us?

Yup.

Copied from goop you pulled out of the lesbian zombie chick?

Yup.

Will it make me hotter to lesbians?

Sure. Why not.

Load me up with dubious code, flyboy.

Can't make you any less.

klik

DAY ONE.
MISS NARBON IS USING ME
TO TEST HER SPESHUL
SMART JERBILS. I HAV TO SOLV
AN AMAZED AND
THE JURBIL RUN
AROUND THE



SO FAR THE JERBIL
HAS ONE EVRY TIME.
THIS AMAZED IS
PRITTY HARD.



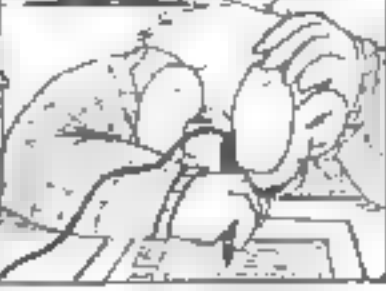
BUT THAT
DARN ~~TEST~~
JERBIL GETS IT
I FIGUR MISS
NARBON MUST
OF MADE THAT
JURBIL RILLY
SMART.



Actualy
that's an
ordnary
aero
n over
hero

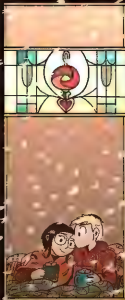


MISS NARBON
SAY2 IF I DO
RILLY GOOD,
I CAN HAV MY
SIGARETS BAK.
THEN I CAN THINK
STRATE AGEN.
THIS IS CALLD
INGENTIV.









Shin Doki is a member of the Shin Doki team.
www.shindoki.com



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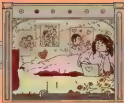


Plot Summary by Spencer H. Carthy to Jeffrey T. Wells

2010-10-10 10:11



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Tales of

DEEP IRONY

RCA BULL BING

NONSENSE, IN ORDER
TO DEVELOP MY SERUM,
I HAVE HAD TO GAMBLE

GO ANSWER THE BOOK.

HELLO! I'M THE BLACK
KNIGHT AND I'M HERE

SEN JIN HERE

AAARGH! IT'S WORKING!
I CAN FEEL IT GIVING ME THE
STRENGTH OF TWENTY MEN!

THEY SAY IT'S THE
STRONGEST OF ALL THE
SERUMS EVER MADE

FEETS, DON'T
FAIL ME NOW!





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TEACHER

I put a limit on Jordan Cho's reports on *Sonic the Hedgehog* fanfiction, and I have to put a limit on your reports on old Gothic novels.

PANEL FOUR

Halley drops her books, setting off a seizure.

HALLEY

Quack! What if it's not a report? What if it's...

HALLEY

INTERPRETIVE DANCE.

PANELS FIVE-SEVEN

Halley does wilsony dance moves from the Kate Bush "Wattering Heights" video. Probably the wilsony thing in the end.

PAGE 1

PANEL ONE

The teacher is unimpressed.

PANEL TWO

TEACHER

A new book report by Mowley. Go.

PANEL THREE

Halley turns to leave, backpack on and books in arms.

HALLEY

Shh

PANEL FOUR

I made it
don't do this
time you were
to report on
a different
book.

So...

Jane Eyre?

No Jane Eyre.
No *Castle of Otranto*.
For ~~the report~~
a real education, you
have to read
something that
isn't a Gothic novel.

It's not that I don't
sympathize. But I ~~can't~~ just
Patience ~~Patience~~

But references are
so... ~~important~~
The darkness!
The
creativity!
The handsome
crabby man.

reports on
Sonic the Hedgehog
fanfiction. So I have
to put a limit on
your reports on old Gothic novels.

Quack! What if I
don't do it as a
report? What if I
do it as...

INTERPRETIVE
DANCE?





Illustration by Deborah A. Manning & Jeffrey D. White
www.illustrationart.com